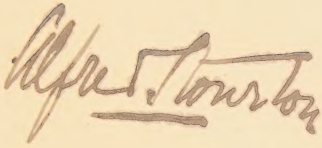
20.



THE

DOCTOR'S WIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

SECOND EDITION

LONDON
JOHN MAXWELL AND COMPANY
122 FLEET STREET
M DCCC LXIV.

[*All rights reserved.*]

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
Pancras Road, N.W.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A YOUNG MAN FROM THE COUNTRY	1
II.	A SENSATION AUTHOR	16
III.	ISABEL	42
IV.	THE END OF GEORGE GILBERT'S HOLIDAY	82
V.	GEORGE AT HOME	108
VI.	TOO MUCH ALONE	140
VII.	ON THE BRIDGE	169
VIII.	ABOUT POOR JOE TILLET'S YOUNG WIFE	209
IX.	MISS SLEAFORD'S ENGAGEMENT	221
X.	A BAD BEGINNING	238
XI.	"SHE ONLY SAID, 'MY LIFE IS WEARY!'"	258
XII.	SOMETHING LIKE A BIRTHDAY.	279

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/doctorswife00brad_0

THE DOCTOR'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG MAN FROM THE COUNTRY.

THERE were two surgeons in the little town of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, in pretty pastoral Midlandshire,—Mr. Pawlkatt, who lived in a big, new, brazen-faced house in the middle of the queer old High Street; and John Gilbert, the parish doctor, who lived in his own house on the outskirts of Graybridge, and worked very hard for a smaller income than that which the stylish Mr. Pawlkatt derived from his aristocratic patients.

John Gilbert was an elderly man, with a young son. He had married late in life, and his wife had died very soon after the birth of this son. It was

for this reason, most likely, that the surgeon loved his child as children are rarely loved by their fathers—with an earnest, over-anxious devotion, which from the very first had been something womanly in its character, and which grew with the child's growth. Mr. Gilbert's mind was narrowed by the circle in which he lived. He had inherited his own patients and the parish patients from his father, who had been a surgeon before him, and who had lived in the same house, with the same red lamp over the little old-fashioned surgery-door, for eight-and-forty years, and had died, leaving the house, the practice, and the red lamp to his son.

If John Gilbert's only child had possessed the capacity of a Newton or the aspirations of a Napoleon, the surgeon would nevertheless have shut him up in the surgery to compound aloes and conserve of roses, tincture of rhubarb and essence of peppermint. Luckily for the boy, he was only a commonplace lad, with a good-looking, rosy face; clear gray eyes, which stared at you frankly; and a thick stubble of brown hair, parted in the middle

and waving from the roots. He was tall, straight, and muscular; a good runner, a first-rate cricketer, tolerably skilful with a pair of boxing-gloves or single-sticks, and a decent shot. He wrote a fair business-like hand, was an excellent arithmetician, remembered a smattering of Latin, a random line here and there from those Roman poets and philosophers whose writings had been his torment at a certain classical and commercial academy at Wareham. He spoke and wrote tolerable English, had read Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, and infinitely preferred the latter, though he made a point of skipping the first few chapters of the great novelist's fictions in order to get at once to the action of the story. He was a very good young man, and went to church two or three times on a Sunday, and would on no account have broken any one of the Ten Commandments on the painted tablets above the altar by so much as a thought. He was very good; and, above all, he was very good-looking. No one had ever disputed this fact: George Gilbert was eminently good-looking. No one had ever gone so far as to call him handsome;

no one had ever presumed to designate him "plain." He had those homely, healthy good looks which the novelist or poet in search of a hero would recoil from with actual horror, and which the practical mind involuntarily associates with tenant-farming in a small way, or the sale of butcher's meat.

I will not say that poor George was ungentlemanly, because he had kind, cordial manners, and a certain instinctive Christianity, which had never yet expressed itself in any very tangible form, but which lent a genial flavour to every word upon his lips, to every thought in his heart. He was a very trusting young man, and thought well of all mankind; he was a Tory, heart and soul, as his father and grandfather had been before him; and thought especially well of all the magnates round about Wareham and Graybridge, holding the grand names that had been familiar to him from his childhood in simple reverence, that was without a thought of meanness. He was a candid, honest, country-bred young man, who did his duty well, and filled a small place in a very narrow circle

with credit to himself and the father who loved him. The fiery ordeal of two years' student-life at St. Bartholomew's had left the lad almost as innocent as a girl; for John Gilbert had planted his son during those two awful years in the heart of a quiet Wesleyan family in the Seven-Sisters Road, and the boy had enjoyed very little leisure for disporting himself with the dangerous spirits of St. Bartholomew's. George Gilbert was two-and-twenty, and in all the course of those two-and-twenty years which made the sum of the young man's life, his father had never had reason to reproach him by so much as a look. The young doctor was held to be a model youth in the town of Graybridge; and it was whispered that if he should presume to lift his eyes to Miss Sophronia Burdock, the second daughter of the rich maltster, he need not aspire i vain. But George was by no means a coxcomb, and didn't particularly admire Miss Burdock, whose eyelashes were a good deal paler than her hair, and whose eyebrows were only visible in a strong light. The surgeon was young, and the world was all before him; but he was not

ambitious; he felt no sense of oppression in the narrow High Street at Graybridge. He could sit in the little parlour next the surgery reading Byron's fiercest poems, sympathising in his own way with Giaours and Corsairs; but with no passionate yearning stirring up in his breast, with no thought of revolt against the dull quiet of his life. There are prisoners and prisoners. There are some who grow flowers in the windows of their cells, who make themselves comfortable, who invent all manner of ingenious contrivances whereby to render their narrow chambers pleasant, who eat and drink and sleep, placidly indifferent to all the world outside the cruel walls that shut them in. There are other captives who sit at their barred windows staring for ever at one patch of distant sky—that lovely sky, which covers a free world—and slowly consume themselves with the fire of their own souls.

George Gilbert took his life as he found it, and had no wish to make it better. To him Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne was all the world. He had been in London, and had felt a provincial's

brief sense of surprised delight in the thronged streets, the clamour, and the bustle; but he had very soon discovered that the great metropolis was a dirty and disreputable place as compared to Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, where you might have taken your dinner comfortably off any door-step as far as the matter of cleanliness is concerned. The young man was more than satisfied with his life; he was pleased with it. He was pleased to think that he was to be his father's partner, and was to live and marry, and have children, and die at last in the familiar rooms in which he had been born. His nature was very adhesive, and he loved the things that he had long known, because they were old and familiar to him; rather than for any merit or beauty in the things themselves.

The 20th of July 1852 was a very great day for George Gilbert, and indeed for the town of Graybridge generally; for on that day an excursion-train left Wareham for London, conveying such roving spirits as cared to pay a week's visit to the great metropolis upon very moderate terms. George had a week's holiday, which he was to

spend with an old schoolfellow who had turned author, and had chambers in the Temple, but who boarded and lodged with a family at Camberwell. The young surgeon left Graybridge in the maltster's carriage at eight o'clock upon that bright summer morning, in company with Miss Burdock and her sister Sophronia, who were going up to London on a visit to an aristocratic aunt in Baker Street, and who had been confided to George's care during the journey.

The young ladies and their attendant squire were in very high spirits. London, when your time is spent between St. Bartholomew's Hospital and the Seven-Sisters Road, is not the most delightful city in the world; but London, when you are a young man from the country, with a week's holiday, and a five-pound note and some odd silver in your pocket, assumes quite another aspect. George was not enthusiastic; but he looked forward to his holiday with a placid sense of pleasure, and listened with untiring good humour to the conversation of the maltster's daughters, who gave him a good deal of information about their aunt

in Baker Street, and the brilliant parties given by that lady and her acquaintance. But, amiable as the young ladies were, George was glad when the Midlandshire train steamed into the Euston Terminus, and his charge was ended. He handed the Misses Burdock to a portly and rather pompous lady, who had a clarence-and-pair waiting for her, and who thanked him with supreme condescension for his care of her nieces. She even went so far as to ask him to call in Baker Street during his stay in London, at which Sophronia blushed. But, unhappily, Sophronia did not blush prettily; a faint patchy red broke out all over her face, even where her eyebrows ought to have been, and was a long time dispersing. If the blush had been Beauty's bright, transient glow, as brief as summer lightning in a sunset sky, George Gilbert could scarcely have been blind to its flattering import; but he looked at the young lady's emotion from a professional point of view, and mistook it for indigestion.

"You're very kind, ma'am," he said. "But I'm going to stay at Camberwell; I don't think I shall have time to call in Baker Street."

The carriage drove away, and George took his portmanteau and went to find a cab. He hailed a hansom, and he felt as he stepped into it that he was doing a dreadful thing, which would tell against him in Graybridge, if by any evil chance it should become known that he had ridden in that disreputable vehicle. He thought the horse had a rakish, unkempt look about the head and mane, like an animal who was accustomed to night-work, and indifferent as to his personal appearance in the day. George was not used to riding in hansoms, so, instead of balancing himself upon the step for a moment while he gave his orders to the charioteer, he settled himself comfortably inside, and was a little startled when a hoarse voice at the back of his head demanded "Where to, sir?" and suggested the momentary idea that he was breaking out into involuntary ventriloquism.

"The Temple, driver; the Temple, in Fleet Street," Mr. Gilbert said politely.

The man banged down a little trap-door, and rattled off eastwards.

I am afraid to say how much George Gilbert

gave the cabman when he was set down at last at the bottom of Chancery Lane: but I think he paid for five miles at eightpence a mile, and a trifle in on account of a blockade in Holborn; and even then the driver did not thank him.

George was a long time groping about the courts and quadrangles of the Temple before he found the place he wanted, though he took a crumpled letter out of his waistcoat-pocket, and referred to it every now and then when he came to a standstill.

Wareham is only a hundred and twenty miles from London; and the excursion-train, after stopping at every station on the line, had arrived at the terminus at half-past two o'clock. It was between three and four now, and the sun was shining upon the river, and the flags in the Temple were hot under Mr. Gilbert's feet. He was very warm himself, and almost worn out, when he found at last the name he was looking for, painted very high up, in white letters, upon a black door-post, —"4th Floor: Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith."

It was in the most obscure corner of the dingiest court in the Temple that George Gilbert found this name. He climbed a very dirty staircase, thumping the end of his portmanteau upon every stair as he went up, until he came to a landing, midway between the third and fourth stories; here he was obliged to stop for sheer want of breath, for he had been lugging the portmanteau about with him throughout his wanderings in the Temple, and a good many people had been startled by the aspect of a well-dressed young man carrying his own luggage, and staring at the names of the different rows of houses, the courts, and quadrangles in the grave sanctuary.

George Gilbert stopped to take breath; and he had scarcely done so, when he was terrified by the apparition of a very dirty boy, who slid suddenly down the baluster between the floor above and the landing, and alighted face to face with the young surgeon. The boy's face was very black, and he was evidently a child of tender years, something between eleven and twelve, perhaps; but he was in no wise discomfited by the appear-

ance of Mr. Gilbert; he ran up-stairs again, and placed himself astride upon the slippery baluster with a view to another descent, when a door above was suddenly opened, and a voice said, "You know where Mr. Manders, the artist, lives?"

"Yes, sir;—Waterloo Road, sir, Montague Terrace, No. 2."

"Then run round to him, and tell him the subject for the next illustration in the *Smuggler's Bride*. A man with his knee upon the chest of another man, and a knife in his hand. You can remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And bring me a proof of chapter fifty-seven."

"Yes, sir."

The door was shut, and the boy ran down-stairs, past George Gilbert, as fast as he could go. But the door above was opened again, and the same voice called aloud,

"Tell Mr. Manders the man with the knife in his hand must have on top-boots."

"All right, sir," the boy called from the bottom of the staircase.

George Gilbert went up, and knocked at the door above. It was a black door, and the names of Mr. Andrew Morgan and Mr. Sigismund Smith were painted upon it in white letters as upon the door-post below.

A pale-faced young man, with a smudge of ink upon the end of his nose, and very dirty wrist-bands, opened the door.

"Sam!"

"George!" cried the two young men simultaneously, and then began to shake hands, with effusion, as the French playwrights say.

"My dear old George!"

"My dear old Sam! But you call yourself Sigismund, now?"

"Yes; Sigismund Smith. It sounds well; doesn't it? If a man's evil destiny makes him a Smith, the least he can do is to take it out in his Christian name. No Smith with a grain of spirit would ever consent to be a Samuel. But come in, dear old boy, and put your portmanteau down; knock those papers off that chair—there, by the window. Don't be frightened of making 'em in a

muddle; they can't be in a worse muddle than they are now. If you don't mind just amusing yourself with the *Times* for half an hour or so, while I finish this chapter of the *Smuggler's Bride*, I shall be able to strike work, and do whatever you like; but the printer's boy is coming back in half an hour for the end of the chapter."

"I won't speak a word," George said respectfully. The young man with the smudgy nose was an author, and George Gilbert had an awful sense of the solemnity of his friend's vocation. "Write away, my dear Sam; I won't interrupt you."

He drew his chair close to the open window, and looked down into the court below, where the paint was slowly blistering in the July sun.

CHAPTER II.

A SENSATION AUTHOR.

Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, "sensation," had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in divers forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. Sigismund Smith was the author of about half a dozen highly-spiced fictions, which enjoyed an immense popularity amongst the classes who like their literature as they like their tobacco—very strong. Sigismund had never in his life presented himself before the public in a complete form; he appeared in weekly numbers at a penny, and was always so appearing; and except on one occasion when he found himself, very greasy and dog's-eared at the edges, and not

exactly pleasant to the sense of smell,—on the shelf of a humble librarian and newsvendor, who dealt in tobacco and sweetstuff as well as literature, —Sigismund had never known what it was to be bound. He was well paid for his work, and he was contented. He had his ambition, which was to write a great novel; and the archetype of this *magnum opus* was the dream which he carried about with him wherever he went, and fondly nursed by night and day. In the mean time he wrote for his public, which was a public that bought its literature in the same manner as its pudding—in penny slices.

There was very little to look at in the court below the window, so George Gilbert fell to watching his friend, whose rapid pen scratched along the paper in a breathless way, which indicated a dashing and Dumas-like style of literature, rather than the polished composition of a Johnson or an Addison. Sigismund only drew breath once, and then he paused to make frantic gashes at his shirt-collar with an inky bone paper-knife that lay upon the table.

"I'm only trying whether a man would cut his throat from right to left, or left to right," Mr. Smith said, in answer to his friend's look of terror; "it's as well to be true to nature; or as true as one can be, for a pound a page;—double-column pages, and eighty-one lines in a column. A man would cut his throat from left to right: he couldn't do it the other way, without making perfect slices of himself."

"There's a suicide, then, in your story?" George said, with a look of awe.

"*A* suicide!" exclaimed Sigismund Smith; "*a* suicide in the *Smuggler's Bride!* why, it teems with suicides. There's the Duke of Port St. Martin's, who walls himself up alive in his own cellar; and there's Leonie de Pasdebasque, the ballet-dancer, who throws herself out of Count Cæsar Maraschetti's private balloon; and there's Lilia, the dumb girl,—the penny public like dumb girls,—who sets fire to herself to escape from the —in fact, there's lots of them," said Mr. Smith, dipping his pen in his ink, and hurrying wildly along the paper.

The boy came back before the last page was finished, and Mr. Smith detained him for five or ten minutes, at the end of which time he rolled up the manuscript, still damp, and dismissed the printer's emissary.

"Now, George," he said, "I can talk to you."

Sigismund was the son of a Wareham attorney, and the two young men had been schoolfellows at the Classical and Commercial Academy in the Wareham Road. They had been schoolfellows, and were very sincerely attached to each other. Sigismund was supposed to be reading for the Bar; and for the first twelve months of his sojourn in the Temple the young man had worked honestly and conscientiously; but finding that his legal studies resulted in nothing but mental perplexity and confusion, Sigismund grew weary of waiting for the briefs that never came, and beguiled his leisure by the pursuit of literature.

He found literature a great deal more profitable and a great deal easier than the law; and

he abandoned himself entirely to the composition of such works as are to be seen, garnished with striking illustrations, in the windows of humble newsvendors in the smaller and dingier thoroughfares of every large town. Sigismund gave himself wholly to this fascinating pursuit, and perhaps produced more sheets of that mysterious stuff which literary people call "copy" than any other author of his age.

It would be almost impossible for me adequately to describe the difference between Sigismund Smith as he was known to the very few friends who knew any thing at all about him, and Sigismund Smith as he appeared on paper.

In the narrow circle of his home Mr. Smith was a very mild young man, with the most placid blue eyes that ever looked out of a human head, and a good deal of light curling hair. He was a very mild young man. He could not have hit any one if he had tried ever so; and if you had hit him, I don't think he would have minded—much. It was not in him to be very angry; or to fall in love, to any serious extent; or to be

desperate about any thing. Perhaps it was that he exhausted all that was passionate in his nature in penny numbers, and had nothing left for the affairs of real life. People who were impressed by his fictions, and were curious to see him, generally left him with a strong sense of disappointment, if not indignation. They had their own idea of what the author of the *Smuggler's Bride* and *Lilia the Deserted* ought to be, and Mr. Smith did not at all come up to the popular standard; so the most enthusiastic admirers of his romances were apt to complain of him as an impostor when they beheld him in private life.

Was this meek young man the Byronic hero they had pictured? Was this the author of *Colonel Montefiasco, or the Brand upon the Shoulder-blade?* They had imagined a splendid creature, half magician, half brigand, with a pale face and fierce black eyes, a tumbled mass of raven hair, a bare white throat, a long black-velvet dressing-gown, and thin tapering hands with queer agate and onyx rings coiling up the flexible fingers.

And then the surroundings. An oak-panelled chamber, of course—black oak, with grotesque and diabolical carvings jutting out at the angles of the room; a crystal globe upon a porphyry pedestal; a mysterious picture, with a curtain drawn before it—certain death being the fate of him who dared to raise that curtain by so much as a corner. A mantelpiece of black marble, and a collection of pistols and scymitars, swords and yataghans — especially yataghans, — glimmering and flashing in the firelight. A little show of eccentricity in the way of household pets: a bear under the sofa, and a tame cobra di capella coiled upon the hearthrug. This was the sort of thing the penny public expected of Sigismund Smith; and, lo, here was a young man with perennial ink-smudges upon his face, and an untidy chamber in the Temple, with nothing more romantic than a waste-paper basket, a litter of old letters and tumbled proofs, and a cracked teapot simmering upon the hob.

This was the young man who described the reckless extravagance of a Montefiasco's sump-

tuous chamber, the mysterious elegance of a Diana Firmiani's dimly-lighted boudoir. This was the young man in whose works there were more masked doors, and hidden staircases, and revolving picture-frames and sliding panels, than in all the old houses in Great Britain; and a greater length of vaulted passages than would make an underground railway from the Scottish border to the Land's End. This was the young man who, in an early volume of poems—a failure, as it is the nature of all early volumes of poems to be—had cried in passionate accents to some youthful member of the aristocracy, surname unknown—

"Lady Mable, Lady May, no pæan in your praise I'll sing;
My shattered lyre all mutely tells
The tortured hand that broke the string.
Go, fair and false, while jangling bells
Through golden waves of sunshine ring;
Go, mistress of a thousand spells:
But know, midst those you've left forlorn,
One, lady, gives you scorn for scorn."

"Now, George," Mr. Smith said, as he pushed

away a very dirty inkstand, and wiped his pen upon the cuff of his coat,—"now, George, I can attend to the rights of hospitality. You must be hungry after your journey, poor old boy! What'll you take?"

There were no cupboards in the room, which was very bare of furniture, and the only vestiges of any kind of refreshment were a brown crockery-ware teapot upon the hob, and a roll and pat of butter upon a plate on the mantelpiece.

"Have something?" Sigismund said. "I know there isn't much, because, you see, I never have time to attend to that sort of thing. Have some bread and marmalade?"

He drew out a drawer in the desk before which he was sitting, and triumphantly displayed a pot of marmalade with a spoon in it.

"Bread and marmalade and cold tea's capital," he said; "you'll try some, George, won't you? and then we'll go home to Camberwell."

Mr. Gilbert declined the bread and marmalade; so Sigismund prepared to take his departure.

"Morgan's gone into Buckinghamshire for a

week's fishing," he said, "so I've got the place to myself. I come here of a morning, you know, work all day, and go home to tea and a chop or a steak in the evening. Come along, old fellow."

The young men went out upon the landing. Sigismund locked the black door and put the key in his pocket. They went down-stairs, and through the courts, and across the quadrangles of the Temple, bearing towards that outlet which is nearest Blackfriars Bridge.

"You'd like to walk, I suppose, George?" Mr. Smith asked.

"Oh, yes; we can talk better walking."

They talked a great deal as they went along. They were very fond of one another, and had each of them a good deal to tell; but George wasn't much of a talker as compared to his friend Sigismund. That young man poured forth a perpetual stream of eloquence, which knew no exhaustion.

"And so you like the people at Camberwell?" George said.

"Oh, yes, they're capital people; free-and-easy, you know, and no stupid, stuck-up gentility

about them. Not but what Sleaford's a gentleman; he's a barrister. I don't know exactly where his chambers are, or in what court he practises when he's in town; but he *is* a barrister. I suppose he goes on circuit sometimes, for he's very often away from home for a long time together; but I don't know what circuit he goes on. It doesn't do to ask a man those sort of questions, you see, George; so I hold my tongue. I don't think he's rich, that's to say not rich in a regular way. He's flush of money sometimes, and then you should see the Sunday dinners—salmon and cucumber, and duck and green peas, as if they were nothing."

"Is he a nice fellow?"

"Oh, yes; a jolly, out-spoken sort of a fellow, with a loud voice and black eyes. "He's a capital fellow to me, but he's not fond of company. He seldom shows if I take down a friend. Very likely you mayn't see him all the time you stay there. He'll shut himself up in his own room when he's at home, and won't so much as look at you."

George seemed to be rather alarmed at this prospect.

"But if Mr. Sleaford objects to my being in the house," he began, "perhaps I'd better —"

"Oh, he doesn't object, bless you!" Sigismund cried hastily; "not a bit of it. I said to Mrs. Sleaford the other morning at breakfast, 'A friend of mine is coming up from Midlandshire; he's as good a fellow as ever breathed,' I said, 'and good-looking into the bargain,'—don't you blush, George, because it's spooney,—and I asked Mrs. S. if she could give you a room and partially board you,—I'm a partial boarder, you know,—for a week or so. She looked at her husband,—she's very sharp with all of *us*, but she's afraid of *him*,—and Sleaford said yes; my friend might come and should be welcome, as long as he wasn't bothered about it. So your room's ready, George, and you come as my visitor; and I can get orders for all the theatres in London, and I'll give you a French dinner in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square every day of your life, if you like; and we'll fill the cup of dissipation to the highest top sparkle."

It was a long walk from the Temple to Camberwell; but the two young men were good

walkers, and as Sigismund Smith talked unceasingly all the way, there were no awkward pauses in the conversation. They walked the whole length of the Walworth Road, and turned to the left soon after passing the turnpike. Mr. Smith conducted his friend by mazy convolutions of narrow streets and lanes, where there were pretty little villas and comfortable cottages nestling amongst trees, and where there was the perpetual sound of clattering tin pails and the slopping of milk, blending pleasantly with the cry of the milkman. Sigismund led George through these shady little retreats, and past a tall stern-looking church, and along by the brink of a canal, till they came to a place where the country was wild and sterile in the year 1852. I dare say that railways have cut the neighbourhood all to pieces by this time, and that Mr. Sleaford's house has been sold by auction in the form of old bricks; but on this summer afternoon the place to which Sigismund brought his friend was quite a lonely, countryfied spot, where there was one big, ill-looking house, shut in by a high wall, and straggling rows of cottages dwindling away nto pigsties upon each side of it.

Standing before a little wooden door in the wall that surrounded Mr. Sleaford's garden, George Gilbert could only see that the house was a square brick building, with sickly ivy straggling here and there about it, and long narrow windows considerably obscured by dust and dirt. It was not a pleasant house to look at, however agreeable it might be as a habitation; and George compared it unfavourably with the trim white-walled villas he had seen on his way,—those neat little mansions at five-and-thirty pounds a year; those cosy little cottages, with shining windows that winked and blinked in the sunshine by reason of their cleanliness; those dazzling brass plates, which shone like brazen shields upon the vivid green of newly-painted front doors. If Mr. Sleaford's house had ever been painted within Mr. Sleaford's memory, the barrister must have been one of the oldest inhabitants of that sterile region on the outskirts of Camberwell; if Mr. Sleaford held the house upon a repairing lease, he must have anticipated a prodigious claim for dilapidations at the expiration of his tenancy. Whatever could be broken in Mr.

Sleaford's house, was broken; whatever could fall out of repair, had so fallen. The bricks held together, and the house stood; and that was about all that could be said for the barrister's habitation.

The bell was broken, and the handle rattled loosely in a kind of basin of tarnished brass, so it was no use attempting to ring; but Sigismund was used to this. He stooped down, put his lips to a hole broken in the woodwork above the lock of the garden-door, and gave a shrill whistle.

"They understand that," he said; "the bell's been broken ever since I've lived here, but they never have any thing mended."

"Why not?"

"Because they're thinking of leaving. I've been with them two years and a half, and they've been thinking of leaving all the time. Sleaford has got the house cheap, and the landlord won't do any thing; so between them they let it go. Sleaford talks about going to Australia some of these days."

The garden-door was opened while Mr. Smith was talking, and the two young men went in. The

person who had admitted them was a boy who had just arrived at that period of life when boys are most obnoxious. He had ceased to be a boy pure and simple, and had not yet presumed to call himself a young man. Rejected on one side by his juniors, who found him arrogant and despotic, mooting strange and unorthodox theories with regard to marbles, and evincing supreme contempt for boys who were not familiar with the latest vaticinations of the sporting prophets in the *Bell's Life* and the *Sunday Times;* and flouted on the other hand by his seniors, who offered him halfpence for the purchase of hardbake, and taunted him with base insinuations when he was seized with a sudden fancy for going to look at the weather in the middle of a strong cheroot,—the hobbledehoy sought vainly for a standing-place upon the social scale, and finding none, became a misanthrope, and wrapped himself in scorn as in a mantle. For Sigismund Smith the gloomy youth cherished a peculiar hatred. The young author was master of that proud position to attain which the boy struggled in vain. He was a man! He could smoke

a cigar to the very stump, and not grow ashy pale, or stagger dizzily once during the operation; but how little he made of his advantages! He could stay out late of nights, and there was no one to reprove him. *He* could go into a popular tavern, and call for gin-and-bitters, and drink the mixture without so much as a wry face; and slap his money upon the pewter counter, and call the barmaid "Mary;" and there was no chance of *his* mother happening to be passing at that moment, and catching a glimpse of his familiar back-view through the half-open swinging door, and rushing in, red and angry, to lead him off by the collar of his jacket, amid the laughter of heartless bystanders. No; Sigismund Smith was a MAN. He might have got tipsy if he had liked, and walked about London half the night, ringing surgeons' bells, and pulling off knockers, and being taken to the station-house early in the morning, to be bailed out by a friend by and by, and to have his name in the Sunday papers, with a sensational heading, "Another tipsy swell," or "A modern spring-heeled Jack."

Yes; Horace Sleaford hated his mother's partial boarder; but his hatred was tempered by disdain. What did Mr. Smith make of all his lofty privileges? Nothing; absolutely nothing. The glory of manhood was thrown away upon a mean-spirited cur, who, possessed of liberty to go where he pleased, had never seen a fight for the championship of England, or the last grand rush for the blue riband of the turf; and who, at four-and-twenty years of age, ate bread and marmalade openly in the face of contemptuous mankind. Master Sleaford shut the door with a bang, and locked it. There was one exception to the rule of no repairs in Mr. Sleaford's establishment: the locks were all kept in excellent order. The disdainful boy took the key from the lock, and carried it in-doors on his little finger. He had warts upon his hands, and warts are the stigmata of boyhood; and the sleeves of his jacket were white and shiny at the elbows, and left him cruelly exposed about the wrists. The knowledge of his youth, and that shabby frouziness of raiment peculiar to middle-class hobbledehoyhood, gave him a sulky fierce-

ness of aspect, which harmonised well with a pair of big black eyes, and a tumbled shock of blue-black hair. He suspected every body of despising him, and was perpetually trying to look down the scorn of others with still deeper scorn. He stared at George Gilbert, as the young man came into the garden, but did not deign to speak. George was six feet high, and that was in itself enough to make *him* hateful.

"Well, Horace!" Mr. Smith said good-naturedly.

"Well, young 'un," the boy answered disdainfully, "how do *you* find yourself?"

Horace Sleaford led the way into the house. They went up a flight of steps leading to a half-glass door. It might have been pretty once upon a time, when the glass was bright, and the latticed porch sheltered by clustering roses and clematis; but the clematis had withered, and the straggling roses were choked with wild convolvulus tendrils, that wound about the branches like weedy serpents, and stifled buds and blossoms in their weedy embrace.

The boy banged open the door of the house, as he had banged-to the door of the garden. He made a point of doing every thing with a bang: it was one way of evincing his contempt for his species.

"Mother's in the kitchen," he said; "the boys are on the common flying a kite, and Izzie's in the garden."

"Is your father at home?" Sigismund asked.

"No, he isn't. Clever; you might have known that without asking. When ever is he at home at this time of day?"

"Is tea ready?"

"No, nor won't be for this half-hour," answered the boy triumphantly; "so, if you and your friend are hungry, you'd better have some bread and marmalade. There's a pot in your drawer, up-stairs. I haven't taken any, and I shouldn't have seen it if I hadn't gone to look for a steel pen; so, if you've made a mark upon the label, and think the marmalade's gone down lower, it isn't *me*. Tea won't be ready for half an hour; for the kitchen-fire's been smokin', and the chops

can't be done till that's clear; and the kettle ain't on either; and the girl's gone to fetch a fancy loaf,—so you'll have to wait."

"Oh, never mind that," Sigismund said; "come into the garden, George; I'll introduce you to Miss Sleaford."

"Then *I* shan't go with you," said the boy. "I don't care for girls' talk. I say, Mr. Gilbert, you're a Midlandshire man, and you ought to know something. What odds will you give me against Mr. Tomlinson's brown colt, Vinegar Cruet, for the Conventford steeple-chase?"

Unfortunately Mr. Gilbert was lamentably ignorant of the merits or demerits of Vinegar Cruet.

"I'll tell you what I'll do with you, then," the boy said; "I'll take fifteen to two against him in fourpenny-bits, and that's one less than the last Manchester quotation."

George shook his head. "Horse-racing is worse than Greek to me, Master Sleaford," he said.

The "Master" goaded the boy to retaliate.

"Your friend don't seem to have seen much life," he said to Sigismund. "I think we shall be able to show him a thing or two before he goes back to Midlandshire, eh, Samuel?"

Horace Sleaford had discovered that fatal name, Samuel, in an old prayer-book belonging to Mr. Smith; and he kept it in reserve, as a kind of poisoned dart, always ready to be hurled at his foe.

"We'll teach him a little life, eh, SAMUEL?" he repeated. "Haw, haw, haw!"

But his gaiety was cut suddenly short; for a door in the shadowy passage opened, and a woman's face, thin and vinegary of aspect, looked out, and a shrill voice cried:

"Didn't I tell you I wanted another penn'orth of milk fetched, you young torment? But, law, you're like the rest of them, that's all! *I* may slave my life out, and there isn't one of you will as much as lift a finger to help me."

The boy disappeared upon this, grumbling sulkily; and Sigismund opened a door leading into a parlour.

The room was large, but shabbily furnished and very untidy. The traces of half a dozen different occupations were scattered about, and the apartment was evidently inhabited by people who made a point of never putting any thing away. There was a workbox upon the table, open, and running over with a confusion of tangled tapes, and bobbins, and a mass of different-coloured threads, that looked like variegated vermicelli. There was an old-fashioned desk, covered with dusty green baize, and decorated with loose brass-work, which caught at people's garments or wounded their flesh when the desk was carried about; this was open, like the workbox, and was littered with papers that had been blown about by the summer breeze, and were scattered all over the table and the floor beneath it. On a rickety little table near the window there was a dilapidated box of colours, a pot of gum with a lot of brushes sticking up out of it, half a dozen sheets of Skelt's dramatic scenes and characters lying under scraps of tinsel, and fragments of coloured satin, and neatly-folded packets of little gold and silver

dots, which the uninitiated might have mistaken for powders. There were some ragged-looking books on a shelf near the fire-place; two or three different kinds of inkstands on the mantelpiece; a miniature wooden stage, with a lop-sided paste-board proscenium and greasy tin lamps, in one corner of the floor; a fishing-rod and tackle leaning against the wall in another corner; and the room was generally pervaded by copy-books, slate pencils, and torn Latin grammars with half a brown-leather cover hanging to the leaves by a stout drab thread. Every thing in the apartment was shabby, and more or less dilapidated; nothing was particularly clean; and every where there was the evidence of boys.

I believe Mr. Sleaford's was the true policy. If you have boys, "cry havoc, and let loose the dogs of war;" shut your purse against the painter and the carpenter, the plumber and glazier, the upholsterer and gardener; "let what is broken, so remain,"—reparations are wasted labour, and wasted money. Buy a box of carpenter's tools for your boys, if you like, and let them mend what

they themselves have broken; and, if you don't mind their sawing off one or two of their fingers occasionally, you may end by making them tolerably useful.

Mr. Sleaford had one daughter and four sons, and the sons were all boys. People ceased to wonder at the shabbiness of his furniture and the dilapidation of his house, when they were made aware of this fact. The limp chintz curtains that straggled from the cornice had been torn ruthlessly down to serve as draperies for Tom when he personated the ghost in a charade, or for Jack when he wanted a sail to fasten to his fishing-rod, firmly planted on the quarter-deck of the sofa. The chairs had done duty as blocks for the accommodation of many an imaginary Anne Boleyn and Marie Antoinette, upon long winter evenings, when Horace decapitated the sofa-pillow with a smoky poker, while Tom and Jack kept guard upon the scaffold, and held the populace—of one —at bay with their halberds—the tongs and shovel. The loose carpets had done duty as raging oceans on many a night, when the easy-chair had gone

to pieces against the sideboard, with a loss of two wine-glasses, and all hands had been picked up in a perishing state by the crew of the sofa, after an undramatic interlude of slaps, cuffs, and remonstrances from the higher powers, who walked into the storm-beaten ocean with cruel disregard of the unities. Mr. Sleaford had a room to himself upstairs, a Bluebeard chamber, which the boys never entered; for the barrister made a point of locking his door whenever he left his room, and his sons were therefore compelled to respect his apartment. They looked through the keyhole now and then, to see if there was any thing of a mysterious nature in the forbidden chamber; but, as they saw nothing but a dingy easy-chair and an office-table, with a quantity of papers scattered about it, their curiosity gradually subsided, and they ceased to concern themselves in any manner about the apartment, which they always spoke of as "Pa's room."

CHAPTER III.

ISABEL.

The garden at the back of Mr. Sleaford's house was a large square plot of ground, with fine old pear-trees sheltering a neglected lawn. A row of hazel-bushes screened all the length of the wall upon one side of the garden; and wherever you looked, there were roses and sweet-brier, espaliered apples, and tall straggling raspberry-bushes, all equally unfamiliar with the gardener's pruning-knife; though here and there you came to a luckless bush that had been hacked at and mutilated in some amateur operations of "the boys."

It was an old-fashioned garden, and had doubtless once been beautifully kept; for bright garden-flowers grew up amongst the weeds summer after summer, as if even neglect or cruel usage could not disroot them from the familiar

place they loved. Thus rare orchids sprouted up out of beds that were half full of chickweed, and lilies-of-the-valley flourished amongst the groundsel in a shady corner under the water-butt. There were vines, upon which no grape had ever been suffered to ripen during Mr. Sleaford's tenancy, but which yet made a beautiful screen of verdant tracery all over the back of the house, twining their loving tendrils about the dilapidated Venetian shutters, that rotted slowly on their rusted hinges. There were strawberry-beds, and there was an arbour at one end of the garden in which the boys played at "beggar my neighbour" and "all fours" with greasy, dog's-eared cards in the long summer afternoons; and there were some rabbit-hutches —sure evidence of the neighbourhood of boys— in a sheltered corner under the hazel-bushes. It was a dear old, untidy place, where the odour of distant pigsties mingled faintly with the perfume of the roses; and it was in this neglected garden that Isabel Sleaford spent the best part of her idle, useless life.

She was sitting in a basket-chair under one of the pear-trees when Sigismund Smith and his friend went into the garden to look for her. She was lolling in a low basket-chair, with a book on her lap, and her chin resting on the palm of her hand, so absorbed by the interest of the page before her that she did not even lift her eyes when the two young men went close up to her. She wore a muslin dress, a good deal tumbled and not too clean, and a strip of black velvet was tied round her long throat. Her hair was almost as black as her brother's, and was rolled up in a great loose knot, from which a long untidy curl fell straggling on her white throat—her throat was very white, with the dead, yellowish whiteness of ivory.

"I wish that was *Colonel Montefiasco*," said Mr. Smith, pointing to the book which the young lady was reading. "I should like to see a lady so interested in one of *my* books that she wouldn't so much as look up when a gentleman was waiting to be introduced to her."

Miss Sleaford shut her book and rose from

her low chair, abashed by this reproach; but she kept her thumb between the pages, and evidently meant to go on with the volume at the first convenient opportunity. She did not wait for any ceremonious introduction to George, but held out her hand to him, and smiled at him frankly.

"You are Mr. Gilbert, I know," she said. "Sigismund has been talking of you incessantly for the last week. Mamma has got your room ready; and I suppose we shall have tea soon. There are to be some chops on purpose for your friend, Sigismund, mamma told me to tell you."

She glanced downwards at the book, as much as to say that she had finished speaking, and wanted to get back to it.

"What is it, Izzie?" Sigismund asked, interpreting her look.

"Algerman Mountfort."

"Ah, I thought so. Always *his* books."

A faint blush trembled over Miss Sleaford's pale face.

"They are so beautiful!" she said.

"Dangerously beautiful, I'm afraid, Isabel," the young man said gravely; "beautiful sweetmeats, with opium inside the sugar. These books don't make you happy, do they, Izzie?"

"No, they make me unhappy; but"—she hesitated a little, and then blushed as she said —"I like that sort of unhappiness. It's better than eating and drinking and sleeping, and being happy that way."

George could only stare at the young lady's kindling face, which lighted up all in a moment, and was suddenly beautiful, like some transparency which seems a dingy picture till you put a lamp behind it. The young surgeon could only stare wonderingly at Mr. Sleaford's daughter, for he hadn't the faintest idea what she and his friend were talking about. He could only watch her pale face, over which faint blushes trembled and vanished like the roseate reflections of a sunset sky. George Gilbert saw that Isabel Sleaford had eyes that were large and black, like her brother's, but which were entirely different from his, notwithstanding; for they were soft

and sleepy, with very little light in them, and what little light there was, only a dim dreamy glimmer in the depths of the large pupils. Being a very quiet young man, without much to say for himself, George Gilbert had plenty of leisure in which to examine the young lady's face as she talked to her mother's boarder, who was on cordial brotherly terms with her. George was not a very enthusiastic young man, and he looked at Miss Sleaford's face with no more emotion than if she had been a statue amongst many statues in a gallery of sculpture. He saw that she had small delicate features and a pale face, and that her great black eyes alone invested her with a kind of weird and melancholy beauty, which kindled into warmer loveliness when she smiled.

George did not see the full extent of Isabel Sleaford's beauty, for he was merely a good young man, with a tolerable commonplace intellect, and Isabel's beauty was of a poetical kind, which could only be fully comprehended by a poet; but Mr. Gilbert arrived at a vague

conviction that she was what he called "pretty," and he wondered how it was that her eyes looked a tawny yellow when the light shone full upon them, and a dense black when they were shadowed by their dark lashes.

George was not so much impressed by Miss Sleaford's beauty as by the fact that she was entirely different from any woman he had ever seen before; and I think herein lay this young lady's richest charm, by right of which she should have won the homage of an emperor. There was no one like her. Whatever beauty she had was her own, and no common property shared with a hundred other pretty girls. You saw her once, and remembered her for ever; but you never saw any mortal face that reminded you of hers.

She shut her book altogether at Sigismund's request, and went with the two young men to show George the garden; but she carried the dingy-looking volume lovingly under her arm, and she relapsed into a dreamy silence every now and then, as if she had been reading the

hidden pages by some strange faculty of clairvoyance.

Horace Sleaford came running out presently, and summoned the wanderers to the house, where tea was ready.

"The boys are to have theirs in the kitchen," he said; "and we elders tea together in the front parlour."

Three younger boys came trooping out as he spoke, and one by one presented a dingy paw to Mr. Gilbert. They had been flying a kite, and fishing in the canal, and helping to stack some hay in the distant meadow; and they were rough and tumbled, and smelt strongly of out-door amusements. They were all three very much like their brother; and George, looking at the four boys as they clustered round him, saw eight of the blackest eyes he ever remembered having looked upon; but not one of those four pairs of eyes bore any resemblance to Isabel's. The boys were only Miss Sleaford's half-brothers. Mr. Sleaford's first wife had died three years after her marriage, and Isabel's only memory of her

mother was the faint shadow of a loving, melancholy face; a transient shadow, that came to the motherless girl sometimes in her sleep.

An old servant, who had come one day, long ago, to see the Sleafords, told Isabel that her mother had once had a great trouble, and that it had killed her. The child had asked what the great trouble was; but the old servant only shook her head, and said, "Better for you not to know, my poor, sweet lamb; better for you never to know."

There was a pencil-sketch of the first Mrs. Sleaford in the best parlour; a fly-spotted pencil-sketch, which represented a young woman like Isabel, dressed in a short-waisted gown, with big balloon sleeves; and this was all Miss Sleaford knew of her mother.

The present Mrs. Sleaford was a shrewish little woman, with light hair, and sharp gray eyes; a well-meaning little woman, who made every body about her miserable, and who worked from morning till night, and yet never seemed to finish any task she undertook. The Sleafords

kept one servant, a maid-of-all-work, who was called the girl; but this young person very rarely emerged from the back-kitchen, where there was a perpetual pumping of water and clattering of hardware, except to disfigure the gooseberry-bushes with pudding-cloths and dusters, which she hung out to dry in the sunshine. To the ignorant mind it would have seemed that the Sleafords might have been very nearly as well off without a servant; for Mrs. Sleaford appeared to do all the cooking and the greater part of the house-work, while Isabel and the boys took it in turns to go upon errands and attend to the garden-door.

The front-parlour was a palatial chamber as compared to the back; for the boys were chased away with slaps by Mrs. Sleaford when they carried thither that artistic paraphernalia which she called their "rubbish," and the depredations of the race were, therefore, less visible in this apartment. Mrs. Sleaford had made herself "tidy" in honour of her new boarder, and her face was shining with the recent application of

strong yellow-soap. George saw at once that she was a very common little woman, and that any intellectual graces inherited by the boys must have descended to them from their father. He had a profound reverence for the higher branch of the legal profession, and he wondered that a barrister should have married such a woman as Mrs. Sleaford, and should be content to live in the muddle peculiar to a household where the mistress is her own cook, and the junior branches are amateur errand-boys.

After tea the two young men walked up and down the weedy pathways in the garden, while Isabel sat under her favourite pear-tree reading the volume she had been so loth to close. Sigismund and his Midlandshire friend walked up and down, smoking cigars, and talking of what they called old times; but those old times were only four or five years ago, though the young men talked like graybeards, who look back half a century or so, and wonder at the folly of their youth.

Isabel went on with her book; the light was dying away little by little, dropping down behind

the pear-trees at the western side of the garden, and the pale evening star glimmered at the end of one of the pathways. She read on more eagerly, almost breathlessly, as the light grew less: for her stepmother would call her in by and by, and there would be a torn jacket to mend, perhaps, or a heap of worsted-socks to be darned for the boys; and there would be no chance of reading another line of that sweet sentimental story, that heavenly prose, which fell into a cadence like poetry, that tender, melancholy music which haunted the reader long after the book was shut and laid aside, and made the dull course of common life so dismally unendurable.

Isabel Sleaford was not quite eighteen years of age. She had been taught a smattering of every thing at a day-school in the Albany Road; rather a stylish seminary in the opinion of the Camberwellians. She knew a little Italian, enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread, and just so much of modern history as enabled her to pick out all

the sugarplums in the historian's pages,—the Mary Stuarts and Joan of Arcs and Anne Boleyns, the Iron Masks and La Vallières, the Marie Antoinettes and Charlotte Cordays, luckless Königsmarks and wicked Borgias; all the romantic and horrible stories scattered amid the dry records of Magna Chartas and Reform Bills, clamorous Third Estates and Beds of Justice. She played the piano a little, and sang a little, and painted wishy-washy-looking flowers on Bristol-board *from* nature, but not at all *like* nature; for the passion-flowers were apt to come out like blue muslin frills, and the fuchsias would have passed for prawns with short-sighted people.

Miss Sleaford had received that half-and-half education which is popular with the poorer middle classes. She left the Albany-Road seminary in her sixteenth year, and set to work to educate herself by means of the nearest circulating library. She did not feed upon garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction, and read her favourite novels over and over again, and wrote little ex-

tracts of her own choosing in penny account-books, usually employed for the entry of butcher's meat and grocery. She knew whole pages of her pet authors by heart, and used to recite long sentimental passages to Sigismund Smith in the dusky summer evenings; and I am sorry to say that the young man, going to work at Colonel Montefiasco next morning, would put neat paraphrases of Bulwer, or Dickens, or Thackeray into that gentleman's mouth, and invest the heroic brigand with the genial humour of a John Brodie, the spirituality of a Zanoni, and the savage sarcasm of a Lord Steyne. Perhaps there never was a wider difference between two people than that which existed between Isabel Sleaford and her mother's boarder. Sigismund wrote romantic fictions by wholesale, and yet was as unromantic as the prosiest butcher who ever entered a cattle-market. He sold his imagination, and Isabel lived upon hers. To him romance was something which must be woven into the form most likely to suit the popular demand. He slapped his heroes into

marketable shape, as coolly as a butterman slaps a pat of butter into the semblance of a swan or a crown, in accordance with the requirements of his customers. But poor Isabel's heroes were impalpable tyrants, and ruled her life. She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine,—unhappy perhaps, and dying early. She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes. She fancied every time she had a little cough that the consumption was coming, and she began to pose herself, and was gently melancholy to her half-brothers, and told them one by one, in confidence, that she did not think she should be with them long. They were slow to understand the drift of her remarks, and would ask her if she was going out as a governess; and, if she took the trouble to explain her dismal meaning, were apt to destroy the sentiment of the situation by saying, "Oh, come now, Hookee Walker. Who eat a plum-dumpling yesterday for dinner, and asked for more? That's the only sort of con-

sumption *you*'ve got, Izzie; two helps of pudding at dinner, and no end of bread-and-butter for breakfast."

It was not so that Florence Dombey's friends addressed her. It was not thus that little Paul would have spoken to his sister; but then, who could tolerate these great healthy boys after reading about little Paul?

Poor Izzie's life was altogether vulgar and commonplace, and she could not extract one ray of romance out of it, twist it as she would. Her father was not a Dombey, or an Augustine Caxton, or even a Rawdon Crawley. He was a stout, broad-shouldered, good-tempered-looking man, who was fond of good eating, and drank three bottles of French brandy every week of his life. He was tolerably fond of his children; but he never took them out with him, and he saw very little of them at home. There was nothing romantic to be got out of him. Isabel would have been rather glad if he had ill-used her; for then she would have had a grievance, and that would have been something. If he would have worked

himself up into a rage, and struck her on the stairs, she might have run out into the lane by the canal; but, alas, she had no good Captain Cuttle with whom to take refuge, no noble-hearted Walter to come back to her, with his shadow trembling on the wall in the dim firelight! Alas, alas! she looked north and south and east and west, and the sky was all dark; so she was obliged to go back to her intellectual opium-eating, and become a dreamer of dreams. She had plenty of grievances in a small way, such as having to mend awkward three-cornered rents in her brothers' garments, and being sent to fetch butter in the Walworth Road; but she was willing enough to do these things when once you had wrenched her away from her idolised books, and she carried her ideal world wherever she went, and was tending delirious Byron at Missolonghi, or standing by the deathbed of Napoleon the Great, while the shopman slapped the butter on the scale, and the vulgar people hustled her before the greasy counter.

If there had been any one to take this lonely

girl in hand and organise her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her; but there was no friendly finger to point a pathway in the intellectual forest, and Isabel rambled as her inclination led her, now setting-up one idol, now superseding him by another; living as much alone as if she had resided in a balloon, for ever suspended in mid air, and never coming down in serious earnest to the common joys and sorrows of the vulgar life about her.

George and Sigismund talked of Miss Sleaford when they grew tired of discoursing upon the memories of their schoolboy life in Midlandshire.

"You didn't tell me that Mr. Sleaford had a daughter," George said.

"Didn't I?"

"No. She—Miss Sleaford—is very pretty."

"She's gorgeous," answered Sigismund, with enthusiasm; "she's lovely. I do her for all my dark heroines,—the good heroines, not the wicked ones. Have you noticed Isabel's eyes? People call them black; but they're bright orange colour, if you look at them in the sunshine. There's a

story of Balzac's called *The Girl with the Golden Eyes*. I never knew what golden eyes were till I saw Isabel Sleaford."

"You seem very much at home with her?"

"Oh, yes; we're like brother and sister. She helps me with my work sometimes; at least, she throws out suggestions, and I use them. But she's dreadfully romantic. She reads too many novels."

"Too many?"

"Yes. Don't suppose that I want to depreciate the value of the article. A novel's a splendid thing after a hard day's work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world, a healthy race on the barren moorland of life, a hearty wrestling-match in the universal ring. Sit down then and read *Ernest Maltravers*, or *Eugene Aram*, or the *Bride of Lammermoor*, and the sweet romance lulls your tired soul to rest, like the cradle-song that soothes a child. No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be

paraphrases of their favourite books. That girl yonder wouldn't look at a decent young fellow in a Government office, with three hundred a year and the chance of advancement," said Mr. Smith, pointing to Isabel Sleaford with a backward jerk of his thumb. "*She's* waiting for a melancholy creature, with a murder on his mind."

They went across the grass to the pear-tree, under which Isabel was still seated. It was growing dark, and her pale face and black eyes had a mysterious look in the dusky twilight. George Gilbert thought she was fitted to be the heroine of a romance, and felt himself miserably awkward and commonplace as he stood before her, struggling with the sensation that he had more arms and legs than he knew what to do with. I like to think of these three people gathered in this neglected suburban garden upon the 21st of July 1852, for they were on the very threshold of life, and the future lay before them like a great stage in a theatre; but the curtain was down, and all beyond it was a dense mystery. These three foolish children had their own ideas about the great

mystery. Isabel thought that she would meet a duke some day in the Walworth Road: the duke would be driving his cab, and she would be wearing her best bonnet and *not* going to fetch butter; and the young patrician would be struck by her, and would drive off to her father, and there and then make a formal demand of her hand; and she would be married to him, and wear ruby velvet and a diamond coronet ever after, like Edith Dombey in Mr. Hablot Browne's grand picture. Poor George fashioned no such romantic destiny in his day-dreams. He thought that he would marry some pretty girl, and have plenty of patients, and perhaps some day be engaged in a great case which would be mentioned in the *Lancet*, and live and die respected, as his grandfather had done before him, in the old house with the red-tiled roof and oaken gable-ends painted black. Sigismund had, of course, only one vision,—and that was the publication of that great book, which should be written about by the reviewers and praised by the public. He could afford to take life very quietly himself; for was he not, in a vi-

carious manner, going through more adventures than ever the mind of man imagined? He came home to Camberwell of an afternoon, and took half a pound of rump-steak and three or four cups of weak tea, and lounged about the weedy garden with the boys; and other young men, who saw what his life was, sneered at him and called him "slow." Slow, indeed! Is it slow to be dangling from a housetop with a frayed rope slipping through your hands and seventy feet of empty space below you? Is it slow to be on board a ship on fire in the middle of the lonely Atlantic, and to rescue the entire crew on one fragile raft, with the handsomest female passenger lashed to your waist by means of her back hair? Is it slow to go down into subterranean passages, with a dark lantern and half a dozen bloodhounds, in pursuit of a murderer? This was the sort of thing that Sigismund was doing all day, and every day—upon paper; and when the day's work was done, he was very well contented to loll in a garden-chair and smoke his cigar, while enthusiastic Isabel talked to him about Byron, and Shelley, and

Napoleon the First; for the two poets and the warrior were her three idols, and tears came into her eyes when she talked of the sorrowful evening after Waterloo, or the wasted journey to Missolonghi, just as if she had known and loved these great men.

The lower windows of the house were lighted by this time, and Mrs. Sleaford came to the back-parlour window to call the young people to supper. They kept primitive hours at Camberwell, and supper was the pleasantest meal in the day; for Mrs. Sleaford's work was done by that time, and she softened into amiability, and discoursed plaintively of her troubles to Sigismund and her children. But to-night was to be a kind of gala, on account of the young man from the country. So there was a lobster and a heap of lettuces,—very little lobster in proportion to the green stuff,—and Sigismund was to make a salad. He was very proud of his skill in this department of culinary art, and as he was generally about five-and-twenty minutes chopping, and sprinkling, and

stirring, and tasting, and compounding, before the salad was ready, there was ample time for conversation. To-night George Gilbert talked to Isabel; while Horace enjoyed the privilege of sitting up to supper chiefly because there was no one in the house strong enough to send him to bed, since he refused to retire to his chamber unless driven there by force. He sat opposite his sister, and amused himself by sucking the long feelers of the lobster, and staring reflectively at George with his elbows on the table, while Sigismund mixed the salad.

They were all very comfortable and very merry, for Isabel forgot her heroes, and condescended to come down temporarily to George's level, and talk about the Great Exhibition of the previous year, and the pantomime she had seen last Christmas. He thought her very pretty as she smiled at him across the table; but he fell to wondering about her again, and wondered why it was she was so different from Miss Sophronia Burdock and the young ladies of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, whom he had known all his life,

and in whom he had never found cause for wonder.

The salad was pronounced ready at last, and the "six ale," as Horace called it, was poured out into long narrow glasses, and being a light frisky kind of beverage, was almost as good as champagne. George had been to supper-parties at Graybridge at which there had been real champagne, and jellies, and trifles, but where the talk had not been half so pleasant as at this humble supper-table, on which there were not two forks that matched one another, or a glass that was free from flaw or crack. The young surgeon enjoyed his first night at Camberwell to his heart's content; and Sigismund's spirits rose perceptibly with the six ale. It was when the little party was gayest that Horace jumped up suddenly with the empty lobster-shell in his hand, and told his companions to "hold their noise."

"I heard him," he said.

A shrill whistle from the gate sounded as the boy spoke.

"That's him again!" he exclaimed, running

to the door of the room. "He's been at it ever so long, perhaps; and won't he just give it me if he has!"

Every body was silent; and George heard the boy opening the hall-door and going out to the gate. He heard a brief colloquy, and a deep voice with rather a sulky tone in it, and then heavy footsteps coming along the paved garden-walk and mounting the steps before the door.

"It's your pa, Izzie," Mrs. Sleaford said. "He'll want a candle: you'd better take it out to him; I don't suppose he'll care about coming in here."

George Gilbert felt a kind of curiosity about Isabel's father, and was rather disappointed when he learnt that Mr. Sleaford was not coming into the parlour. But Sigismund Smith went on eating bread-and-cheese, and fishing pickled onions out of a deep stone jar, without any reference to the movements of the barrister.

Isabel took a candle, and went out into the hall to greet her father. She left the door ajar, and George could hear her talking to Mr. Slea-

ford; but the barrister answered his daughter with a very ill grace, and the speech which George heard plainest gave him no very favourable impression of his host.

"Give me the light, girl, and don't bother!" Mr. Sleaford said. "I've been worried this day until my head's all of a muddle. Don't stand staring at me, child! Tell your mother I've got some work to do, and mayn't go to bed all night."

"You've been worried, papa?"

"Yes; infernally. And I don't want to be bothered by stupid questions now I've got home. Give me the light, can't you?"

The heavy footsteps went slowly up the uncarpeted staircase, a door opened on the floor above, and the footsteps were heard in the room over the parlour.

Isabel came in, looking very grave, and sat down, away from the table.

George saw that all pleasure was over for that night; and even Sigismund came to a pause in his depredations on the cheese, and meditated, with a pickled onion on the end of his fork.

He was thinking that a father who ill-used his daughter would not be a bad subject for penny numbers; and he made a mental plan of the plot for a new romance.

If Mr. Sleaford had business which required to be done that night, he seemed in no great hurry to begin his work; for the heavy footsteps tramped up and down, up and down the floor overhead, as steadily as if the barrister had been some ascetic Romanist who had appointed a penance for himself, and was working it out in the solitude of his own chamber. A church-clock in the distance struck eleven presently, and a Dutch-clock in the kitchen struck three, which was tolerably near the mark for any clock in Mr. Sleaford's house. Isabel and her mother made a stir, as if about to retire; so Sigismund got up, and lighted a couple of candles for himself and his friend. He undertook to show George to the room that had been prepared for him, and the two young men went up-stairs together, after bidding the ladies good-night. Horace had fallen asleep, with his elbows upon the table, and his hair flopping

against the flaring tallow-candle near him. The young surgeon took very little notice of the apartment to which he was conducted. He was worn out by his journey, and all the fatigue of the long summer day; so he undressed quickly, and fell asleep while his friend was talking to him through the half-open door between the two bedrooms. George slept, but not soundly; for he was accustomed to a quiet house, in which no human creature stirred after ten o'clock at night; and the heavy tramp of Mr. Sleaford's footsteps in a room near at hand disturbed the young man's slumbers, and mixed themselves with his dreams.

It seemed to George Gilbert as if Mr. Sleaford walked up and down his room all night, and long after the early daylight shone through the dingy window-curtains. George was not surprised, therefore, when he was told at breakfast next morning that his host had not yet risen, and was not likely to appear for some hours. Isabel had to go to the Walworth Road on some mysterious mission; and George overheard fragments of a whispered conversation between the young lady

and her mother in the passage outside the parlour-door, in which the words "poor's rates," and "summonses," and "silver spoons," and "backing," and "interest," figured several times.

Mrs. Sleaford was busy about the house, and the boys were scattered; so George and Sigismund took their breakfast comfortably together, and read Mr. Sleaford's *Times*, which was not as yet required for that gentleman's own use. Sigismund made a plan of the day. He would take a holiday for once in a way, he said, and would escort his friend to the Royal Academy and divers other picture-galleries, and would crown the day's enjoyment by a French dinner.

The two young men left the house at eleven o'clock. They had seen nothing of Isabel that morning, nor of the master of the house. All that George Gilbert knew of that gentleman was the fact that Mr. Sleaford had a heavy footstep and a deep sulky voice.

The 21st of July was a blazing summer's day, and I am ashamed to confess that George Gilbert

grew very tired of staring at the pictures in the Royal Academy. To him the finest works of modern art were only "pretty pictures," more or less interesting according to the story they told; and Sigismund's disquisitions upon "modelling," and "depth," and "feeling," and tone, and colour, and distance, were so much unintelligible jargon; so he was glad when the day's work was over, and Mr. Smith led him away to a very dingy street a little way behind the National Gallery.

"And now I'm going to give you a regular French dinner, George, old fellow!" Sigismund said, in a triumphant tone.

Mr. Gilbert looked about him with an air of mystification. He had been accustomed to associate French dinners with brilliantly lighted cafés and gorgeous saloons, where the chairs were crimson velvet and gold, and where a dozen vast sheets of looking-glass reflected you as you ate your soup. He was a little disappointed, perhaps, when Sigismund paused before a narrow doorway, on each side of which there was an old-fashioned window with queer-shaped wine and liqueur bot-

tles neatly ranged behind the glass. A big lantern-shaped lamp hung over the door, and below one of the windows was an iron grating, through which a subtle flavour of garlic and mock-turtle soup steamed out upon the summer air.

"This is Boujeot's," said Mr. Smith. "It's the jolliest place; no grandeur, you know, but capital wine and first-rate cooking. The Emperor of the French used to dine here almost every day when he was in England; but he never told any one his name, and the waiters didn't know who he was till they saw his portrait as President in the *Illustrated News*."

It is a popular fiction that the Prince Louis Napoleon was in the habit of dining, daily, at every French restaurant in London during the days of his exile; a fiction which gives a romantic flavour to the dishes, and an aroma of poetry to the wines. George Gilbert looked about him as he seated himself at a little table chosen by his friend, and he wondered whether Napoleon the Third had ever sat at that particular table, and whether the table-cloth had been as dirty in his

time. The waiters at Boujeot's were very civil and accommodating, though they were nearly harassed off their legs by the claims of desultory gentlemen in the public apartments, and old customers dining by pre-arrangement in the private rooms up-stairs. Sigismund pounced upon a great sheet of paper, which looked something like a chronological table, and on the blank margins of which the pencil records of dinners lately consumed and paid for had been hurriedly jotted down by the harassed waiters. Mr. Smith was a long time absorbed in the study of this mysterious document; so George Gilbert amused himself by staring at some coffee-coloured marine views upon the walls, which were supposed to represent the Bay of Biscay and the Cape of Good Hope, with brown waves rolling tempestuously under a brown sky. George stared at these, and at a gentleman who was engaged in the soul-absorbing occupation of paying his bill; and then the surgeon's thoughts went vagabondising away from the little coffee-room at Boujeot's to Mr. Sleaford's garden, and Isabel's pale face and yellow-black eyes, glim-

mering mysteriously in the summer twilight. He thought of Miss Sleaford because she was so unlike any other woman he had ever seen, and he wondered how his father would like her. Not much, George feared; for Mr. Gilbert senior expected a young woman to be very neat about her back-hair, which Isabel was not, and handy with her needle, and clever in the management of a house and the government of a maid-of-all-work; and Isabel could scarcely be that, since her favourite employment was to loll in a wicker-work garden-chair and read novels.

The dinner came in at last, with little pewter covers over the dishes, which the waiter drew one by one out of a mysterious kind of wooden oven, from which there came a voice, and nothing more. The two young men dined; and George thought that, except for the fried potatoes, which flew about his plate when he tried to stick his fork into them, and a flavour of garlic, that pervaded every thing savoury, and faintly hovered over the sweets, a French dinner was not so very unlike an English one. But Sigismund served out the little

messes with an air of swelling pride, and George was fain to smack his lips with the manner of a connoisseur when his friend asked him what he thought of the *filets de solè à la maître d'hôtel*, or the *rognons à la* South-African sherry.

Somehow or other George was glad when the dinner was eaten and paid for, and it was time to go home to Camberwell. It was only seven o'clock as yet, and the sun was shining on the fountains as the young men went across Trafalgar Square. They took an omnibus at Charing Cross, and rode to the turnpike at Walworth, in the hope of being in time to get a cup of tea before Mrs. Sleaford let the fire out; for that lady had an aggravating trick of letting out the kitchen-fire at half-past seven or eight o'clock on summer evenings, after which hour hot water was an impossibility; unless Mr. Sleaford wanted grog, in which case a kettle was set upon a bundle of blazing fire-wood.

George Gilbert did not particularly care whether or not there was any tea to be procured at Camberwell, but he looked forward with a faint

thrill of pleasure to the thought of a stroll with Isabel in the twilit garden. He thought so much of this, that he was quite pleased when the big, ill-looking house and the dead wall that surrounded it, became visible across the barren waste of ground that was called a common. He was quite pleased, not with any fierce or passionate emotion, but with a tranquil sense of pleasure. When they came to the wooden door in the garden-wall, Sigismund Smith stooped down and gave his usual whistle at the key-hole; but he looked up suddenly, and cried:

"Well, I'm blest!"

"What's the matter?"

"The door's open."

Mr. Smith pushed it as he spoke, and the two young men went into the front garden.

"In all the time I've lived with the Sleafords, that never happened before," said Sigismund. "Mr. Sleaford's awfully particular about the gate being kept locked. He says that the neighbourhood's a queer one, and you never know what thieves are hanging about the place;

though, *inter nos*, I don't see that there's much to steal hereabouts," Mr. Smith added, in a confidential whisper.

The door of the house, as well as that of the garden, was open. Sigismund went into the hall, followed closely by George. The parlour-door was open too, and the room was empty—the room was empty, and it had an abnormal appearance of tidiness, as if all the litter and rubbish had been suddenly scrambled together and carried away. There was a scrap of old frayed rope upon the table, lying side by side with some tin-tacks, a hammer, and a couple of blank luggage-labels.

George did not stop to look at these; he went straight to the open window and looked out into the garden. He had so fully expected to see Isabel sitting under the pear-tree with a novel in her lap, that he started and drew back with an exclamation of surprise at finding the garden empty; the place seemed so strangely blank without the girlish figure lolling in the basket-chair. It was as if George Gilbert had been

familiar with that garden for the last ten years, and had never seen it without seeing Isabel in her accustomed place.

"I suppose Miss Sleaford—I suppose they're all out," the surgeon said rather dolefully.

"I suppose they *are* out," Sigismund answered, looking about him with a puzzled air; "and yet that's strange. They don't often go out; at least, not all at once. They seldom go out at all, in fact, except on errands. I'll call the girl."

He opened the door and looked into the front-parlour before going to carry out this design, and he started back upon the threshold as if he had seen a ghost.

"What is it?" cried George.

"My luggage and your portmanteau, all packed and corded; look!"

Mr. Smith pointed as he spoke to a couple of trunks, a hat-box, a carpet-bag, and a portmanteau, piled in a heap in the centre of the room. He spoke loudly in his surprise; and the maid-of-all-work came in with her cap hang-

ing by a single hair-pin to a knob of tumbled hair.

"Oh, sir!" she said, "they're all gone; they went at six o'clock this evenin'; and they're going to America, missus says; and she packed all your things, and she thinks you'd better have 'em took round to the greengrocer's immediant, for fear of being seized for the rent, which is three quarters doo; but you was to sleep in the house to-night, if you pleased, and your friend likewise; and I was to get you your breakfastes in the morning, before I take the key round to the Albany Road, and tell the landlord as they've gone away, which he don't know it yet."

"GONE AWAY!" said Sigismund; "GONE AWAY!"

"Yes, sir, every one of 'em; and the boys was so pleased that they would go shoutin' 'ooray, 'ooray, all over the garding, though Mr. Sleaford swore at 'em awful, and did hurry and tear so, I thought he was a-goin' mad. But Miss Isabel, she cried about goin' so sudden, and seemed all pale and frightened like. And there's

a letter on the chimbley-piece, please, which she put it there."

Sigismund pounced upon the letter, and tore it open. George read it over his friend's shoulder. It was only two lines.

"DEAR MR. SMITH,—Don't think hardly of us for going away so suddenly. Papa says it must be so.

"Yours ever faithfully,

"ISABEL."

"I should like to keep that letter," George said, blushing up to the roots of his hair. "Miss Sleaford writes a pretty hand."

CHAPTER IV.

THE END OF GEORGE GILBERT'S HOLIDAY.

The two young men acted very promptly upon that friendly warning conveyed in Mrs. Sleaford's farewell message. The maid-of-all-work went to the greengrocer's, and returned in company with a dirty-looking boy—who was "Mrs. Judkin's son, please, sir"—and a truck. Mrs. Judkin's son piled the trunks, portmanteau, and carpet-bag on the truck, and departed with his load, which was to be kept in the custody of the Judkin family until the next morning, when Sigismund was to take the luggage away in a cab. When this business had been arranged, Mr. Smith and his friend went out into the garden and talked of the surprise that had fallen upon them.

"I always knew they were thinking of leaving," Sigismund said, "but I never thought

they'd go away like this. I feel quite cut up about it, George. I'd got to like them, you know, old boy, and to feel as if I was one of the family; and I shall never be able to partial-board with any body else."

George seemed to take the matter quite as seriously as his friend, though his acquaintance with the Sleafords was little more than four-and-twenty hours old.

"They must have known before to-day that they were going," he said. "People don't go to America at a few hours' notice."

Sigismund summoned the dirty maid-of-all-work, and the two young men subjected her to a very rigorous cross-examination; but she could tell them very little more than she had told them all in one breath in the first instance.

"Mr. Sleaford 'ad 'is breakfast at nigh upon one o'clock, leastways she put on the pertaturs for the boys' dinner before she biled 'is egg; and then he went out, and he come tearin' 'ome agen in one of these 'ansom cabs at three o'clock in the afternoon; and he told misuss to pack up, and he

told the 'ansom cabman to send a four-wheeler from the first stand he passed at six o'clock precise; and the best part of the luggage was sent round to the greengrocer's on a truck, and the rest was took on the roof of the cab, and Master 'Orace rode alongside the cabman, and would smoke one of them nasty penny pickwicks, which they always made 'im bilious; and Mr. Sleaford he didn't go in the cab, but walked off as cool as possible, swinging his stick, and 'olding his 'ead as 'igh as hever."

Sigismund asked the girl if she had heard the address given to the cabman who took the family away.

No, the girl said; Mr. Sleaford had given no address. He directed the cabman to drive over Waterloo Bridge, and that was all the girl heard.

Mr. Smith's astonishment knew no bounds. He walked about the deserted house, and up and down the weedy pathways between the espaliers, until long after the summer moon was bright upon the lawn, and every trailing branch and tender leaflet threw its sharp separate shadow on the shining ground.

"I never heard of such a thing in all my life," the young author cried; "it's like penny numbers. With the exception of their going away in a four-wheeler cab instead of through a sliding panel and subterranean passage, it's for all the world like penny numbers."

"But you'll be able to find out where they've gone, and why they went away so suddenly," suggested George Gilbert; "some of their friends will be able to tell you."

"Friends!" exclaimed Sigismund; "they never had any friends—at least not friends that they visited, or any thing of that kind. Mr. Sleaford used to bring home some of his friends now and then, of an evening after dark generally, or on a Sunday afternoon. But we never saw much of them, for he used to take them up to his own room; and except for his wanting French brandy and cigars fetched, and chops and steaks cooked, and swearing at the girl over the balusters if the plates weren't hot enough, we shouldn't have known that there was company in the house. I suppose his chums were in the law, like him-

self," Mr. Smith added musingly; "but they didn't look much like barristers, for they had straggling moustachios, and a kind of would-be military way; and if they hadn't been Sleaford's friends, I should have thought them raffish-looking."

Neither of the young men could think of any thing or talk of any thing that night except the Sleafords and their abrupt departure. They roamed about the garden, staring at the long grass and the neglected flower-beds; at the osier arbour, dark under the shadow of a trailing vine, that was half-smothered by the vulgar luxuriance of wild hops,—the osier arbour in which the spiders made their home, and where, upon the rotten bench, romantic Izzie had sat through the hot hours of drowsy summer days, reading her favourite novels, and dreaming of a life that was to be like the plot of a novel.

They went into the house, and called for candles, and wandered from room to room, looking blankly at the chairs and tables, the open drawers, the disordered furniture, as if from those

inanimate objects they might obtain some clue to the little domestic mystery that bewildered them. The house was pervaded by torn scraps of paper, fragments of rag and string, morsels of crumpled lace and muslin, bald hair-brushes lying in the corners of the bedrooms, wisps of hay and straw, tin-tacks, and old kid-gloves. Every where there were traces of disorder and hurry, except in Mr. Sleaford's room. That sanctuary was wide open now, and Mr. Smith and his friend went into it and examined it. To Sigismund a newly-excavated chamber in a long-buried city could scarcely have been more interesting. Here there was no evidence of reckless haste. There was not a single fragment of waste paper in any one of the half-dozen open drawers on either side of the desk. There was not so much as an old envelope upon the floor. A great heap of gray ashes upon the cold hearthstone revealed the fact that Mr. Sleaford had employed himself in destroying papers before his hasty departure. The candlestick that Isabel had given him upon the previous night stood upon his desk, with the candle burnt

down to the socket. George remembered having heard his host's heavy footsteps pacing up and down the room; and the occasional opening and shutting of drawers, and slamming of the lids of boxes, which had mixed with his dreams all through that brief summer's night. It was all explained now. Mr. Sleaford had of course been making his preparations for leaving Camberwell —for leaving England; if it was really true that the family were going to America.

Early the next morning there came a very irate gentleman from the Albany Road. This was the proprietor of the neglected mansion, who had just heard of the Sleaford hegira, and who was in a towering passion because of those three quarters' rent which he was never likely to behold. He walked about the house with his hands in his pockets, kicking the doors open, and denouncing his late tenants in very unpleasant language. He stalked into the back parlour, where George and Sigismund were taking spongy French rolls and doubtful French eggs, and glared ferociously at them, and muttered something to the effect that it

was like their impudence to be making themselves so "jolly comfortable" in his house when he'd been swindled by that disreputable gang of theirs. He used other adjectives besides that word "disreputable" when he spoke of the Sleafords; but Sigismund got up from before the dirty tablecloth, and protested, with his mouth full, that he believed in the honesty of the Sleafords; and that, although temporarily under a cloud, Mr. Sleaford would no doubt make a point of looking up the three quarters' rent, and would forward post-office orders for the amount at the earliest opportunity. To this the landlord merely replied, that he hoped his—Sigismund's—head would not ache till Mr. Sleaford *did* send the rent; which friendly aspiration was about the only civil thing the proprietor of the mansion said to either of the young men. He prowled about the rooms, poking the furniture with his stick, and punching his fist into the beds to see if any of the feathers had been extracted therefrom. He groaned over the rents in the carpets, the notches and scratches upon the mahogany, the entire absence of handles and

knobs wherever it was possible for handles or knobs to be wanting; and every time he found out any new dilapidation in the room where the two young men were taking their breakfast, he made as if he would have come down upon them for the cost of the damage.

"Is that the best tea-pot you're a-having your teas out of? Where's the Britannia metal as I gave thirteen-and-six for seven year ago? Where did that twopenny-halfpenny blown-glass sugar-basin come from? It ain't mine; mine was di'-mond-cut. Why, they've done me two hundred pound mischief. I could afford to forgive 'em the rent. The rent's the least part of the damage they've done me."

And then the landlord became too forcible to be recorded in these pages, and then he went groaning about the garden; whereupon George and Sigismund collected their toilet-apparatus, and such trifling paraphernalia as they had retained for the night's use, and hustled them into a carpet-bag, and fled hastily and fearfully, after giving the servant-maid a couple of half-crowns,

and a solemn injunction to write to Sigismund at his address in the Temple if she should hear any tidings whatever of the Sleafords.

So, in the bright summer morning, George Gilbert saw the last of the old house which for nearly seven years had sheltered Mr. Sleaford and his wife and children, the weedy garden in which Isabel had idled away so many hours of her early girlhood, the straggling vines under which she had dreamed bright sentimental dreams over the open leaves of her novels.—(An inexpressible melancholy comes over me as I think of one name that I wrote in the last chapter of this story, and that I can never again write as I wrote it then; one name that must henceforth be missing out of that grand triumvirate of writers whose books were Isabel Sleaford's chief education; one bright and great name which we spoke so lightly not very long ago, and which we think of now with a sad and solemn reverence, with unalloyed regret.)

The young men hired a cab at the nearest cab-stand, and drove to the establishment of the

friendly greengrocer who had given shelter to their goods. It was well for them, perhaps, that the trunks and portmanteau had been conveyed to that humble sanctuary; for the landlord was in no humour to hesitate at trifles, and would have very cheerfully impounded Sigismund's simple wardrobe, and the bran-new linen shirts which George Gilbert had brought to London.

They bestowed a small gratuity upon Mrs. Judkin, and then drove to Sigismund's chambers, where they encamped, and contrived to make themselves tolerably comfortable, in a rough gipsy kind of way.

"You shall have Morgan's room," Sigismund said to his friend, "and I can make up a bed in the sitting-room; there's plenty of mattresses and blankets."

They dined rather late in the evening at a celebrated tavern in the near neighbourhood of those sacred precincts where law and justice have their head-quarters, and after dinner Sigismund borrowed the *Law-List*.

"We may find out something about Mr. Sleaford in that," he said.

But the *Law-List* told nothing of Mr. Sleaford. In vain Sigismund and George took it in turn to explore the long catalogue of legal practitioners whose names began with the letter S. There were St. Johns and Simpsons, St. Evremonds and Smitherses, Standishes and Sykeses. There was almost every variety of appellation, aristocratic and plebeian; but the name of Sleaford was not in that list: and the young men returned the document to the waiter, and went home wondering how it was that Mr. Sleaford's name had no place among the names of his brotherhood.

I have very little to tell concerning the remaining days which the conditions of George Gilbert's excursion-ticket left him free to enjoy in London. He went to the theatres with his friend, and sat in stifling upper boxes, in which there was a considerable sprinkling of the "order" element, during these sunshiny summer evenings. Sigismund also took him to divers *al-fresco* entertain-

ments, where there were fire-works, and "polking," and bottled stout; and in the daytime George was fain to wander about the streets by himself, staring at the shop-windows, and hustled and frowned at for walking on the wrong side of the pavement; or else to loll on the window-seat in Sigismund's apartment, looking down into the court below, or watching his friend's scratching pen scud across the paper. Sacred as the rites of hospitality may be, they must yet give way before the exigencies of the penny press; and Sigismund was rather a dull companion for a young man from the country who was bent upon a week's enjoyment of London life.

For very lack of employment, George grew to take an interest in his friend's labour, and asked him questions about the story that poured so rapidly from his hurrying pen.

"What's it all about, Sigismund?" he demanded. "Is it funny?"

"Funny!" cried Mr. Smith, with a look of horror; "I should think not, indeed. Who ever heard of penny numbers being funny? What the

penny public want is plot, and plenty of it; surprises, and plenty of 'em; mystery, as thick as a November fog. Don't you know the sort of thing? 'The clock of St. Paul's had just sounded eleven hours;'—it's generally a translation, you know, and St. Paul's stands for Notre Dame;—'a man came to appear upon the quay which extends itself all the length between the bridges of Waterloo and London.' There isn't any quay, you know; but you're obliged to have it so, on account of the plot. 'This man—who had a true head of vulture, the nose pointed, sharp, terrible; all that there is of most ferocious; the eyes cavernous, and full of a sombre fire—carried a bag upon his back. Presently he stops himself. He regards with all his eyes the quay, nearly desert; the water, black and slimy, which stretches itself at his feet. He listens, but there is nothing. He bends himself upon the border of the quay. He puts aside the bag from his shoulders, and something of dull, heavy, slides slowly downwards and falls into the water. At the instant that the heavy burden sinks with a dull noise to the bottom of the river, there is a

voice, loud and piercing, which seems to elevate itself out of the darkness: "Philip Launay, what dost thou do there with the corpse of thy victim?"' —That's the sort of thing for the penny public," said Mr. Smith; "or else a good strong combination story."

"What do you call a combination story?" Mr. Gilbert asked innocently.

"Why, you see, when you're doing four great stories a week for a public that must have a continuous flow of incident, you can't be quite as original as a strict sense of honour might prompt you to be; and the next best thing you can do if you haven't got ideas of your own, is to steal other people's ideas in an impartial manner. Don't empty one man's pocket, but take a little bit all round. The combination novel enables a young author to present his public with all the brightest flowers of fiction neatly arranged into every variety of garland. I'm doing a combination novel now —the *Heart of Midlothian* and the *Wandering Jew*. You've no idea how admirably the two stories blend. In the first place, I throw my period back

into the Middle Ages—there's nothing like the Middle Ages for getting over the difficulties of a story. Good gracious me! why, what is there that isn't possible if you go back to the time of the Plantagenets? I make Jeannie Deans a dumb girl,—there's twice the interest in her if you make her dumb,—and I give her a goat and a tambourine, because, you see, the artist likes that sort of thing for his illustrations. I think you'd admit that I've very much improved upon Sir Walter Scott—a delightful writer, I allow, but decidedly a failure in penny numbers—if you were to run your eye over the story, George; there's only seventy-eight numbers out yet, but you'll be able to judge of the plot. Of course I don't make Aureola,—I call my Jeannie 'Aureola;' rather a fine name, isn't it? and entirely my own invention,—of course I don't make Aureola walk from Edinburgh to London. What would be the good of that? why, any body *could* walk it if they only took long enough about it. I make her walk from London to Rome, to get a Papal Bull for the release of her sister from the Tower of London.

That's something like a walk, I flatter myself; over the Alps—which admits of Aureola's getting buried in the snow, and dug out again by a Mount St. Bernard's dog; and then walled up alive by the monks because they suspect her of being friendly to the Lollards; and dug out again by Cæsar Borgia, who happens to be travelling that way, and asks a night's lodging, and hears Aureola's tambourine behind the stone wall in his bedroom, and digs her out and falls in love with her; and she escapes from his persecution out of a window, and lets herself down the side of the mountain by means of her gauze scarf, and dances her way to Rome, and obtains an audience of the Pope, and gets mixed up with the Jesuits:—and that's where I work into the *Wandering Jew*," concluded Mr. Smith.

George Gilbert ventured to suggest that in the days when the Plantagenet ruled our happy isle, Ignatius Loyola had not yet founded his wonderful brotherhood; but Mr. Smith acknowledged this prosaic suggestion with a smile of supreme contempt.

"Oh, if you tie me down to facts," he said, "I can't write at all."

"But you like writing?"

"For the penny public? Oh, yes; I like writing for them. There's only one objection to the style—it's apt to give an author a tendency towards bodies."

Mr. Gilbert was compelled to confess that this last remark was incomprehensible to him.

"Why, you see, the penny public require excitement," said Mr. Smith; "and in order to get the excitement up to a strong point, you're obliged to have recourse to bodies. Say your hero murders his father, and buries him in the coal-cellar in No. 1. What's the consequence? There's an undercurrent of the body in the coal-cellar running through every chapter, like the subject in a fugue or a symphony. You drop it in the treble, you catch it up in the bass; and then it goes sliding up into the treble again, and then drops down with a melodious groan into the bass; and so on to the end of the story. And when you've once had recourse to the stimulant of bodies, you're

like a man who's accustomed to strong liquors, and to whose vitiated palate simple drinks seem flat and wishy-washy. I think there ought to be a literary temperance-pledge, by which the votaries of the ghastly and melodramatic school might bind themselves to the renunciation of the bowl and dagger, the midnight rendezvous, the secret grave dug by lantern-light under a black grove of cypress, the white-robed figure gliding in the gray gloaming athwart a lonely churchyard, and all the alcoholic elements of fiction. But, you see, George, it isn't so easy to turn teetotaller," added Mr. Smith, doubtfully; "and I scarcely know that it is so very wise to make the experiment. Are not reformed drunkards the dullest and most miserable of mankind? Isn't it better for a man to do his best in the style that is natural to him than to do badly in another man's line of business? *Box and Cox* is not a great work when criticised upon sternly æsthetic principles; but I would rather be the author of *Box and Cox*, and hear my audience screaming with laughter from the rise of the curtain to the fall thereof, than write a dull five-act

tragedy, in the unities of which Aristotle himself could find no flaw, but from whose performance panic-stricken spectators should slink away or ere the second act came to its dreary close. I think I should like to have been Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the father and prince of melodrama, the man whose dramas were acted thirty thousand times in France before he died (and how many times in England?); the man who reigned supreme over the playgoers of his time, and has not yet ceased to reign. Who ever quotes any passage from the works of Guilbert de Pixérécourt, or remembers his name? But to this day his dramas are acted in every country theatre; his persecuted heroines weep and tremble; his murderous scoundrels run their two hours' career of villany, to be dragged off scowling to subterranean dungeons, or to die impenitent and groaning at the feet of triumphant virtue. Before nine o'clock to-night there will be honest country-folks trembling for the fate of Theresa, the Orphan of Geneva, and simple matrons weeping over the peril of the Wandering Boys. But Guilbert de Pixérécourt was never a

great man; he was only popular. If a man can't have a niche in the Walhalla, isn't it something to have his name in big letters in the play-bills on the boulevard? and I wonder how long my friend Guilbert would have held the stage, if he had emulated Racine or Corneille. He did what it was in him to do, honestly; and he had his reward. Who would not wish to be great? Do you think I wouldn't rather be the author of the *Vicar of Wakefield* than of *Colonel Montefiasco?* I *could* write the *Vicar of Wakefield*, too; but—"

George stared aghast at his excited friend.

"But not Oliver Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*," Sigismund explained.

He had thrown down his pen now, and was walking up and down the room with his hands thrust deep down in his pockets, and his face scarlet with fierce excitement.

"I should do the Vicar in the detective pre-Raphaelite style. Moses knows a secret of his father's — forged accommodation-bills, or something of that kind; sets out to go to the fair on a drowsy summer morning, not a leaf stirring in

the vicarage-garden. You hear the humming of the bees as they bounce against the vicarage-windows; you see the faint light trembling about Olivia's head, as she comes to watch her brother ride along the road; you see him ride away, and the girl watching him, and feel the hot sleepy atmosphere, and hear the swoop of the sickle in the corn-fields on the other side of the road; and the low white gate swings-to with a little click, and Miss Primrose walks slowly back to the house, and says, 'Papa, it's very warm;' and you know there's something going to happen.

"Then the second chapter comes, and Mr. Primrose has his dinner, and goes out to visit his poor; and the two girls walk about the garden with Mr. Burchell, watching for Moses, who NEVER COMES BACK. And then the serious business of the story begins, and Burchell keeps his eye upon the Vicar. Nobody else suspects good Mr. Primrose; but Burchell's eye is never off him; and one night, when the curtains are drawn, and the girls are sitting at their work, and dear Mrs. Primrose is cutting out comfortable flannels

for the poor, the Vicar opens his desk, and begins to write a letter. You hear the faint sound of the light ashes falling on the hearth, the slow ticking of an eight-day clock in the hall outside the drawing-room door, the sharp snap of Mrs. Primrose's scissors as they close upon the flannel. Sophia asks Burchell to fetch a volume from the bookcase behind the Vicar's chair. He is a long time choosing the book, and his eye looks over the Vicar's shoulder. He takes a mental inventory of the contents of the open desk, and he sees amongst the neatly-docketed papers, the receipted bills, and packets of envelopes—what? a glove, a green-kid glove sewn with white, which he distinctly remembers to have seen worn by Moses when he started on that pleasant journey from which he never returned. Can't you see the Vicar's face, as he looks round at Burchell, and knows that his secret is discovered? I can. Can't you fancy the awful silent duel between the two men, the furtive glances, the hidden allusions to that dreadful mystery, lurking in every word that Burchell utters?

"That's how *I* should do the *Vicar of Wakefield*," said Sigismund Smith triumphantly. "There wouldn't be much in it, you know; but the story would be pervaded by Moses's body lying murdered in a ditch half a mile from the vicarage, and Burchell's ubiquitous eye. I daresay some people would cry out upon it, and declare that it was wicked and immoral, and that the young man who could write about a murder would be ready to commit the deed at the earliest convenient opportunity. But I don't suppose the clergy would take to murdering their sons by reason of my fiction, in which the rules of poetical justice would be sternly adhered to, and Nemesis, in the shape of Burchell, perpetually before the reader."

Poor George Gilbert listened very patiently to his friend's talk, which was not particularly interesting to him. Sigismund preached "shop" to whomsoever would listen to him, or suffer him to talk; which was pretty much the same to this young man. I am afraid there were times when his enthusiastic devotion to his profession rendered Mr. Smith a terrible nuisance to his friends and

acquaintance. He would visit a pleasant country-house, and receive hospitable entertainment, and enjoy himself; and then, when all that was morbid in his imagination had been stimulated by sparkling burgundy and pale hochheimer, this wretched young traitor would steal out into some peaceful garden, where dew-laden flowers flung their odours on the still evening air, and sauntering in the shadowy groves where the nightingale's faint "jug-jug" was beginning to sound, would plan a diabolical murder, to be carried out in seventy-five penny numbers. Sometimes he was honourable enough to ask permission of the proprietor of the country mansion; and when, on one occasion, after admiring the trim flower-gardens and ivied walls, the low turreted towers and grassy moats, of a dear old place that had once been a grange, he ventured to remark that the spot was so peaceful it reminded him of slow poisoning, and demanded whether there would be any objection to his making the quiet grange the scene of his next fiction,—the cordial cheery host cried out, in a big voice that resounded high up among the

trees where the rooks were cawing, "People it with fiends, my dear boy! You're welcome to people the place with fiends, as far as I'm concerned."

CHAPTER V.

GEORGE AT HOME.

The young surgeon went home to Midlandshire with his fellow-excursionists, when the appointed Monday came round. He met Miss Burdock and her sister on the platform in Euston Square, and received those ladies from the hands of their aunt. Sophronia did not blush now when her eyes met George Gilbert's frank stare. She had danced twice with a young barrister at the little quadrille-party which her aunt had given in honour of the maltster's daughters; a young barrister who was tall and dark and stylish, and who spoke of Gray-bridge-on-the-Wayverne as a benighted place, which was only endurable for a week or so in the hunting season. Miss Sophronia Burdock's ideas had expanded during that week in Baker Street, and she treated her travelling companion with an

air of haughty indifference, which might have wounded George to the quick had he been aware of the change in the lady's manner. But poor George saw no alteration in the maltster's daughter; he watched no changes of expression in the face opposite to him as the rushing engine carried him back to Midlandshire. He was thinking of another face, which he had only seen for a few brief hours, and which he was perhaps never again to look upon; a pale girlish countenance, framed with dense black hair; a pale face, out of which there looked large solemn eyes, like stars that glimmer faintly through the twilight shadows.

Before leaving London, George had obtained a promise from his friend Sigismund Smith. Whatever tidings Mr. Smith should at any time hear about the Sleafords, he was to communicate immediately to the young surgeon of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne. It was, of course, very absurd of George to take such an interest in this singular family; the young man admitted as much himself; but, then, singular people are always more or less interesting; and, having been a witness of Mr.

Sleaford's abrupt departure, it was only natural that George should want to know the end of the story. If these people were really gone to America, why, of course, it was all over; but if they had not left London, some one or other of the family might turn up some day, and in that case Sigismund was to write and tell his friend all about it.

George Gilbert's last words upon the platform at Euston Square had relation to this subject; and all the way home he kept debating in his mind whether it was likely the Sleafords had really gone to America, or whether the American idea had been merely thrown out with a view to the mystification of the irate landlord.

Life at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne was as slow and sleepy as the river which widened in the flat meadows outside the town; the dear old river which crept lazily past the mouldering wall of the churchyard, and licked the moss-grown tombstones that had lurched against that ancient boundary. Every thing at Graybridge was more or less old

and quaint and picturesque; but the chief glory of Graybridge was the parish-church; a grand old edifice which was planted beyond the outskirts of the town, and approached by a long avenue of elms, beneath whose shadow the tombstones glimmered whitely in the sun. The capricious Wayverne, which was perpetually winding across your path wheresoever you wandered in pleasant Midlandshire, was widest here; and on still summer days the gray towers of the old church looked down at other phantasmal towers in the tranquil water.

George used to wander in this churchyard sometimes on his return from a trout-fishing expedition, and, lounging among the tombstones with his rod upon his shoulder, would abandon himself to the simple day-dreams he loved best to weave.

But the young surgeon had a good deal of work to do, now that his father had admitted him to the solemn rights of partnership, and very little time for any sentimental musings in the churchyard. The parish work in itself was very heavy, and George rode long distances on

his steady-going gray pony to attend to captious patients, who gave him small thanks for his attendance. He was a very soft-hearted young man, and he often gave his slender pocket-money to those of his patients who wanted food rather than medicine. Little by little people grew to understand that George Gilbert was very different from his father, and had a tender pity for the sorrows and sufferings it was a part of his duty to behold. Love and gratitude for this young doctor may have been somewhat slow to spring up in the hearts of his parish patients; but they took a deep root, and became hardy, vigorous plants before the first year of George's service was over. Before that year came to a close the partnership between the father and son had been irrevocably dissolved, without the aid of legal practitioners, or any legal formulas whatsoever; and George Gilbert was sole master of the old house with the whitewashed plaster-walls and painted beams of massive oak.

The young man lamented the loss of his father with all that single-minded earnestness which was

the dominant attribute of his character. He had been as obedient to his father at the last as he had been at the first; as submissive in his manhood as in his childhood. But in his obedience there had been nothing childish or cowardly. He was obedient because he believed his father to be wise and good, reverencing the old man with simple, unquestioning veneration. And now that the father was gone, George Gilbert began life in real earnest. The poor of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne had good reason to rejoice at the change which had given the young doctor increase of means and power. He was elected unanimously to the post his father's death had left nominally vacant; and wherever there was sickness and pain, his kindly face seemed to bring comfort, his bright blue eyes seemed to inspire courage. He took an atmosphere of youth and hope and brave endurance with him every where, which was more invigorating than the medicines he prescribed; and, next to Mr. Neate the curate, George Gilbert was the best-beloved and most popular man in Graybridge.

He had never had any higher ambition than this. He had no wish to strive or to achieve; he only wanted to be useful; and when he heard the parable of the Talents read aloud in the old church, a glow of gentle happiness thrilled through his veins as he thought of his own small gifts, which had never yet been suffered to grow rusty for lack of service.

The young man's life could scarcely have been more sheltered from the storm and tempest of the world, though the walls of some medieval monastery had encircled his little surgery. Could the tumults of passion ever have a home in the calm breast of these quiet provincials, whose regular lives knew no greater change than the slow alternation of the seasons, whose orderly existences were never disturbed by an event? Away at Conventford there were factory-strikes, and political dissensions, and fighting and rioting now and then; but here the tranquil days crept by, and left no mark by which they might be remembered.

Miss Sophronia Burdock did not long cherish the memory of the dark-haired barrister she had

met in Baker Street. To do so would have been as foolish as to "love some bright particular star, and think to wed it," in the young damsel's opinion. She wisely banished the barrister's splendid image, and she smiled once more upon Mr. Gilbert when she met him coming out of church in the cold wintry sunlight, looking to especial advantage in his new mourning clothes. But George was blind to the sympathetic smiles that greeted him. He was not in love with Miss Sophronia Burdock. The image of Isabel's pale face had faded into a very indistinct shadow by this time; nay, it was almost entirely blotted out by the young man's grief for his father's death; but if his heart was empty enough now, there was no place in it for Miss Burdock, though it was hinted at in Graybridge that a dower of four thousand pounds would accompany that fair damsel's hand. George Gilbert had no high-flown or sentimental notions; but he would have thought it no greater shame to rifle the contents of the maltster's iron safe, than to enrich himself with the possessions of a woman he did not love.

In the mean time he lived his peaceful life in the house where he had been born, mourning with simple, natural sorrow for the old father who had so long sat at the opposite side of the hearth, reading a local paper by the light of a candle held between his eyes and the small print, and putting down the page every now and then to descant, at his ease, upon the degeneracy of the times. The weak, loving, fidgety father was gone now, and George looked blankly at the empty chair which had taken the old man's shape; but his sorrow was unembittered by vain remorse or cruel self-reproach; he had been a good son, and he could look back at his life with his dead father, and thank God for the peaceful life that they had spent together.

But he was very lonely now in the old house, which was a bare, blank place, peopled by no bright inanimate creations by which art fills the homes of wealthy hermits with fair semblances of life. The empty walls stared down upon the young man as he sat alone in the dim candlelight, till he was fain to go into the kitchen, which was the

most cheerful room in the house, and where he could talk to William and Tilly, while he lounged against the quaint old angle of the high oaken chimney-piece smoking his cigar.

William and Tilly were a certain Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson, who had come southwards with the pretty young woman whom Mr. John Gilbert had encountered in the course of a holiday-trip to a quiet Yorkshire town, where the fair towers of a minster rose above a queer old street, beyond whose gabled roofs lay spreading common-lands, fair pasture-farms, and pleasant market-gardens. It was in the homestead attached to one of these pasture-farms that John Gilbert had met the bright, rosy-faced girl whom he made his wife; and Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson were poor relations of the young lady's father. At Mrs. Gilbert's entreaty they consented to leave the little bit of garden and meadow-land which they rented near her father's farm, and followed the surgeon's wife to her new home, where Matilda Jeffson took upon herself the duties of house-keeper, general manager, and servant-of-all-work; while her hus-

band looked after the surgeon's stable, and worked in the long, old-fashioned garden, where the useful element very much preponderated over the ornamental.

I am compelled to admit that, in common with almost all those bright and noble qualities which can make man admirable, Mr. William Jeffson possessed one failing. He was lazy. But then his laziness gave such a delicious, easy-going tone to his whole character, and was so much a part of his good-nature and benevolence, that to wish him faultless would have been to wish him something less than he was. There are some people whose faults are better than other people's virtues. Mr. Jeffson was lazy. In the garden which it was his duty to cultivate, the snails crawled along their peaceful way, unhindered by cruel rake or hoe; but then, on the other hand, the toads grew fat in shadowy corners under the broad dock-leaves, and the empty shells of their slimy victims attested the uses of those ugly and venomous reptiles. The harmony of the universe asserted itself in that Midlandshire garden, unchecked by any presump-

tuous interference from Mr. Jeffson. The weeds grew high in waste patches of ground, left here and there amongst the gooseberry-bushes and the cabbages, the raspberries and potatoes; and William Jeffson offered little hindrance to their rank luxuriance. "There was room enough for aught he wanted," he said philosophically; "and ground that wouldn't grow weeds would be good for naught. Mr. Gilbert had more fruit and vegetables than he could eat, or cared to give away; and surely that was enough for any body." Officious visitors would sometimes suggest this or that alteration or improvement in the simple garden; but Mr. Jeffson would only smile at them with a bland, sleepy smile, as he lolled upon his spade, and remark, "that he'd been used to gardens all his life, and knew what could be made out of 'em, and what couldn't."

In short, Mr. Jeffson and Matilda Jeffson his wife did as they liked in the surgeon's house, and had done so ever since that day upon which they came to Midlandshire to take friendly service with their second cousin, pretty Mrs. John Gilbert.

They took very small wages from their kinswoman's husband, but they had their own apartments, and lived as they pleased, and ordered the lives of their master and mistress, and idolised the fair-haired baby-boy who was born by and by, and who grew day by day under their loving eyes, when the tender gaze of his mother had ceased to follow his toddling footsteps, or yearn for the sight of his frank, innocent face. Mr. Jeffson may have neglected the surgeon's garden, by reason of that lymphatic temperament which was peculiar to him; but there was one business in which he never lacked energy, one pursuit in which he knew no weariness. He was never tired of any labour which contributed to the pleasure or amusement of Mr. Gilbert's only son. He carried the child on his shoulders for long journeys to distant meadows in the sunshiny haymaking season, when all the air was fragrant with the scent of grass and flowers; he clambered through thorny gaps amidst the brambly underwood, and tore the flesh off his poor big hands hunting for blackberries and cob-nuts for Master "Jarge." He persuaded his

master into the purchase of a pony when the boy was five years old, and the little fellow trotted to Wareham at Mr. Jeffson's side when that gentleman went on errands for the Graybridge household. William Jeffson had no children of his own, and he loved the surgeon's boy with all the fondness of a nature peculiarly capable of love and devotion.

It was a bitter day for him when Master Jarge went to the Classical and Commercial Academy at Wareham; and but for those happy Saturday afternoons on which he went to fetch the boy for a holiday that lasted till Sunday evening, poor William Jeffson would have lost all the pleasures of his simple life. What was the good of haymaking if George wasn't in the thick of the fun, clambering on the loaded wain, or standing, flushed and triumphant, high up against the sunlit sky on the growing summit of the new-made stack? What could be drearier work than feeding the pigs, or milking the cow, unless Master Jarge was by to turn labour into pleasure by the bright magic of his presence? William Jeffson

went about his work with a grave countenance during the boy's absence, and only brightened on those delicious Saturday afternoons when Master Jarge came hurrying to the little wooden gate in Dr. Malder's playground, shouting a merry welcome to his friend. There was no storm of rain or hail, snow or sleet, that ever came out of the heavens, heavy enough to hinder Mr. Jeffson's punctual attendance at that little gate. What did he care for drenching showers, or thunderclaps that seemed to shake the earth, so long as the little wooden gate opened, and the fair young face he loved looked out at him with a welcoming smile?

"Our boys laid any money you wouldn't come to-day, Jeff," Master Gilbert said sometimes; "but I knew there wasn't any weather invented that would keep you away."

O blessed reward of fidelity and devotion! What did William Jeffson want more than this?

Matilda Jeffson loved her master's son very dearly in her own way; but her household duties were a great deal heavier than Mr. Jeffson's re-

sponsibilities, and she had little time to waste upon the poetry of affection. She kept the boy's wardrobe in excellent order; baked rare batches of hot cakes on Saturday afternoons for his special gratification; sent him glorious hampers, in which there were big jars of gooseberry-jam, pork-pies, plum-loaves, and shrivelled apples. In all substantial matters Mrs. Jeffson was as much the boy's friend as her husband; but that tender, sympathetic devotion which William felt for his master's son was something beyond her comprehension.

"My master's daft about the lad," she said, when she spoke of the two.

I do not know what William Jeffson might have become had his destiny given him gentlemen for his kindred, and placed a pen in his hand instead of a spade; but I know that there were all the elements of poetry in his nature, and a profound depth of tenderness and sentiment underlying the slow simplicity of his talk, the gentle homeliness of his manner. He came to Midlandshire while still a young man, and he was only five-and-forty years of age at the time

of John Gilbert's death; but at five-and-forty he was as simply sentimental as a schoolgirl of seventeen. He had none of the rough John Brodieism of the ordinary Yorkshireman. He was as brave and honest as Tilda Price's glorious sweetheart; but his manner was as gentle as that of the gentlest of womankind. He was a gentleman pure and simple, fresh from the supreme hand of Nature, who creates a gentleman after her own fashion now and then, to the confusion of all theories about race and culture. If you had taken Mr. Jeffson to a West-End tailor, and ordered a suit of clothes for him, you might have sent him straight into the House of Lords, and no member of that assemblage would have discovered that the intruder had been bred a market-gardener. If some wonderful hazard in the gambling game called Fortune had elevated William Jeffson to a peerage, he would have betrayed himself by no solecism; he would have omitted no duty. Fortune had done nothing for him; but he had been born a gentleman, and no power upon this earth could deprive him of

his birthright. In his low, lazy accents the northern twang melted into the liquid softness of Italian. He was fond of poetry—poetry of the most sentimental order; and would entreat Master Jarge to read or recite favourite extracts from the schoolboy collection that was familiar to him. All the splendour and loveliness of the universe sank as deeply into Mr. Jeffson's breast as into the soul of the greatest poet who ever charmed mankind with the magic of his verse. He lacked the sublime power of expression, but the lesser gift of appreciation had been ungrudgingly bestowed upon him. When George and his father's gardener talked about the stars and the flowers, the changing clouds, the shadows in the river, the solemn stillness of the old church, the slow plash of the willow-branches as they dipped into the water, it was the uneducated man whose thoughts were beyond the comprehension of the educated boy; the pupil's imagination soared away into bright regions, before whose shining portals the teacher shrank away bewildered, dazzled, and confounded.

George Gilbert taught his companion a good deal in those pleasant Saturday evenings, when the surgeon was away amongst his patients, and the boy was free to sit in the kitchen with Mr. and Mrs. Jeffson. He told the Yorkshireman all about those enemies of boyhood, the classic poets; but William infinitely preferred Shakespeare and Milton, Byron and Scott, to the accomplished Romans, whose verses were of the lamest as translated by George. Mr. Jeffson could never have enough of Shakespeare. He was never weary of Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Romeo, the bright young Prince who tried on his father's crown, bold Hotspur, ill-used Richard, passionate Margaret, murderous Gloster, ruined Wolsey, noble Katharine. All that grand gallery of pictures unrolled its splendours for this man, and the schoolboy wondered at the enthusiasm he was powerless to understand. He was inclined to think that practical Mrs. Jeffson was right, and that her husband was a little "daft" upon some matters.

The boy returned his humble friend's affec-

tion with a steady, honest regard, that richly compensated the gardener, whose love was not of a nature to need much recompense, since its growth was as spontaneous and unconscious as that of the wild-flowers amongst the long grass. George returned William Jeffson's affection, but he could not return it in kind. The poetry of friendship was not in his nature. He was honest, sincere, and true, but not sympathetic or assimilative; he preserved his own individuality wherever he went, and took no colour from the people amongst whom he lived.

Mr. Gilbert would have been very lonely now that his father was gone, had it not been for this honest couple, who managed his house and garden, his stable and paddocks, and watched his interests as earnestly as if he had been indeed their son. Whenever he had a spare half-hour, the young man strolled into the old-fashioned kitchen, and smoked his cigar in the chimney-corner, where he had passed so much of his boyhood.

"When I sit here, Jeff," he said sometimes,

"I seem to go back to the old school-days again, and I fancy I hear Brown Molly's hoofs upon the frosty road, and my father's voice calling to you to open the gate."

Mr. Jeffson sighed, as he looked up from the mending of a bridle or the patching of a horse-cloth.

"Them was pleasant days, Master Jarge," he said regretfully. He was thinking that the school-boy had been more to him and nearer to him than the young surgeon could ever be. They had been children together, these two, and William had never grown weary of his childhood. He was left behind now that his companion had grown up, and the happy childish days were all over. There was a gigantic kite on a shelf in the back-kitchen; a kite that Mr. Jeffson had made with his own patient hands. George Gilbert would have laughed now if that kite had been mentioned to him; but William Jeffson would have been constant to the same boyish sports until his hair was gray, and would have never known weariness of spirit.

"You'll be marrying some fine lady, maybe now, Master Jarge," Mrs. Jeffson said; "and she'll look down upon our north-country ways, and turn us out of the old place where we've lived so long."

But George protested eagerly that, were he to marry the daughter of the Queen of England, which was not particularly likely, that royal lady should take kindly to his old servants, or should be no wife of his.

"When I marry, my wife must love the people I love," said the surgeon, who entertained those superb theories upon the management of a wife which are peculiar to youthful bachelors.

George further informed his humble friends that he was not likely to enter the holy estate of matrimony for many years to come, as he had so far seen no one who at all approached his idea of womanly perfection. He had very practical views upon this subject, and meant to wait patiently until some faultless young person came across his pathway; some neat-handed, church-going damsel, with tripping feet and smoothly banded hair;

some fair young sage, who had never been known to do a foolish act or say an idle word. Sometimes the image of Isabel Sleaford trembled faintly upon the magic mirror of the young man's reveries, and he wondered whether, under any combination of circumstances, she would ever arrive at this standard. Oh, no; it was impossible. He looked back to the drowsy summer-time, and saw her lolling in the garden-chair, with the shadows of the branches fluttering upon her tumbled muslin dress, and her black hair pushed anyhow away from the broad low brow.

"I hope that foolish Sigismund won't meet Miss Sleaford again," George thought very gravely; "he might be silly enough to marry her, and I'm sure she'd never make a good wife for any man."

George Gilbert's father died in the autumn of '52; and early in the following spring the young man received a letter from his friend Mr. Smith. Sigismund wrote very discursively about his own prospects and schemes, and gave his friend a brief synopsis of the romance he had last begun.

George skimmed lightly enough over this part of the letter; but as he turned the leaf by and by, he saw a name that brought the blood to his face. He was vexed with himself for that involuntary blush, and sorely puzzled to know why he should be so startled by the unexpected sight of Isabel Sleaford's name.

"You made me promise to tell you any thing that turned up about the Sleafords," Sigismund wrote. "You'll be very much surprised to hear that Miss Sleaford came to me the other day here in my chambers, and asked me if I could help her in any way to get her living. She wanted me to recommend her as a nursery-governess, or companion, or something of that kind, if I knew of any family in want of such a person. She was staying at Islington with a sister of her stepmother's, she told me; but she couldn't be a burden on her any longer. Mrs. Sleaford and the boys have gone to live in Jersey, it seems, on account of things being cheap there; and I have no doubt that boy Horace will become an inveterate smoker. Poor Sleaford is dead. You'll

be as much astounded as I was to hear this. Isabel did not tell me this at first; but I saw that she was dressed in black, and when I asked her about her father, she burst out crying, and sobbed as if her heart would break. I should like to have ascertained what the poor fellow died of, and all about it,—for Sleaford was not an old man, and one of the most powerful-looking fellows I ever saw,—but I could not torture Izzie with questions while she was in such a state of grief and agitation. 'I'm very sorry you've lost your father, my dear Miss Sleaford,' I said; and she sobbed out something that I scarcely heard, and I got her some cold water to drink, and it was ever so long before she came round again and was able to talk to me. Well, I couldn't think of any body that was likely to help her that day; but I took the address of her aunt's house at Islington, and promised to call upon her there in a day or two. I wrote by that day's post to my mother, and asked her if she could help me; and she wrote back by return to tell me that my uncle, Charles Raymond, at Conventford, was in want

of just such a person as Miss Sleaford (of course I had endowed Isabel with all the virtues under the sun), and if I really thought Miss S. would suit, and I could answer for the perfect respectability of her connexions and antecedents,—it isn't to be supposed that I was going to say any thing about that three quarters' rent, or that I should own that Isabel's antecedents were lolling in a garden-chair reading novels, or going on suspicious errands to the *jeweller* ('O my prophetic soul!' *et cetera*) in the Walworth Road,—why, I was to engage Miss S. at twenty pounds a year salary. I went up to Islington that very afternoon, although I was a number and a half behind with *The Demon of the Galleys* (*The D. of the G.* is a sequel to *The Brand upon the Shoulder-blade;* the proprietor of the *Penny Parthenon* insisted upon having a sequel, and I had to bring Colonel Montefiasco to life again, after hurling him over a precipice three hundred feet high),—and the poor girl began to cry when I told her I'd found a home for her. I'm afraid she's had a great deal of trouble since the Sleafords left Camberwell; for

she isn't at all the girl she was. Her stepmother's sister is a vulgar woman who lets lodgings, and there's only one servant—such a miserable slavey; and Isabel went to the door three times while I was there. You know my uncle Raymond, and you know what a dear jolly fellow he is; so you may guess the change will be a very pleasant one for poor Izzie. By the by, you might call and see her the first time you're in Conventford, and write me word how the poor child gets on. I thought she seemed a little frightened at the idea of going among strangers. I saw her off at Euston Square the day before yesterday. She went by the parliamentary train; and I put her in charge of a most respectable family going all the way through, with six children, and a birdcage, and a dog, and a pack of cards to play upon a tea-tray on account of the train being slow."

Mr. Gilbert read this part of his friend's letter three times over before he was able to realise the news contained in it. Mr. Sleaford dead, and Isabel settled as a nursery-governess at Conventford! If the winding Wayverne had overflowed

its sedgy banks and flooded all Midlandshire, the young surgeon could have been scarcely more surprised than he was by the contents of his friend's letter. Isabel at Conventford — within eleven miles of Graybridge; within eleven miles of him at that moment, as he walked up and down the little room, with his hair tumbled all about his flushed good-looking face, and Sigismund's letter in his waistcoat!

What was it to him that Isabel Sleaford was so near? What was she to him, that he should think of her, or be fluttered by the thought that she was within his reach? What did he know of her? Only that she had eyes that were unlike any other eyes he had ever looked at; eyes that haunted his memory like strange stars seen in a feverish dream. He knew nothing of her but this; and that she had a pretty, sentimental manner, a pensive softness in her voice, and sudden flights and capricious changes of expression that had filled his mind with wonder.

George went back to the kitchen and smoked another cigar in Mr. Jeffson's company. He went

to that apartment fully determined to waste no more of his thoughts upon Isabel Sleaford, who was in sober truth a frivolous, sentimental creature, eminently adapted to make any man miserable; but somehow or other, before the cigar was finished, George had told his earliest friend and confidant all about Mr. Sleaford's family, touching very lightly upon Isabel's attractions, and speaking of a visit to Conventford as a disagreeable duty that friendship imposed.

"Of course I shouldn't think of going all that way on purpose to see Miss Sleaford," he said, "though Sigismund seems to expect me to do so; but I must go to Conventford in the course of the week, to see about those drugs Johnson promised to get me. They won't make a very big parcel, and I can bring them home in my coat-pocket. You might trim Brown Molly's fetlocks, Jeff; she'll look all the better for it. I'll go on Thursday; and yet I don't know that I couldn't better spare the time to-morrow."

"To-morrow's market-day, Master Jarge. I was thinkin' of goin' t' Conventford mysen. I

might bring t' droogs for thee, and thoo couldst write a noate askin' after t' young leddy," Mr. Jeffson remarked thoughtfully.

George shook his head. "That would never do, Jeff," he said; "Sigismund asks me to go and see her."

Mr. Jeffson relapsed into a thoughtful silence, out of which he emerged by and by with a slow chuckle.

"I reckon Miss Sleafoord 'll be a pretty girl," he remarked thoughtfully, with rather a sly glance at his young master.

George Gilbert found it necessary to enter into an elaborate explanation upon this subject. No; Miss Sleaford was not pretty. She had no colour in her cheeks, and her nose was nothing particular,—not a beautiful queenlike hook, like that of Miss Harleystone, the belle of Graybridge, who was considered like the youthful members of the peerage,—and her mouth wasn't very small, and her forehead was low; and, in short, some people might think Miss Sleaford plain.

"But thoo doosn't, Master Jarge!" exclaimed

Mr. Jeffson, slapping his hand upon his knee with an intolerable chuckle; "thoo thinkst summoat of her, I'll lay; and I'll trim Brown Molly's fetlocks till she looks as genteel as a thoroughbred."

"Thoo'rt an old fondy!" cried Mrs. Jeffson, looking up from her needlework. "It isn't one of these London lasses as'll make a good wife for Master Jarge; and he'd never be that soft as to go running after nursery-governesses at Conventford when he might have Miss Burdock and all her money, and be one of the first gentlefolks in Graybridge."

"Hold thy noise, Tilly. Thou knowst nowt aboot it. Didn't I marry thee for loove, lass, when I might have had Sarah Peglock, as was only daughter to him as kept t' Red Lion in Belminster; and didn't I come up to London, where thou wast in service, and take thee away from thy pleace; and wasn't Sarah a'most wild when she heard it? Master Jarge 'll marry for loove, or he'll never marry at all. Don't you remember her as wore the pink sash and shoes wi' sandals at the dancin' school, Master Jarge; and us takin'

her a ploom-loaf, and a valentine, and sugar-sticks, and oranges, when you was home for th' holidays?"

Mr. Jeffson had been the confidant of all George's boyish love-affairs, the innocent Leporello of this young provincial Juan; and he was eager to be trusted with new secrets, and to have a finger once more in the sentimental pie. But nothing could be more stern than Mr. Gilbert's denial of any romantic fancy for Miss Sleaford.

"I should be very glad to befriend her in any way," he said gravely; "but she's the very last person in the world that I should ever dream of making my wife."

This young man discussed his matrimonial views with the calm grandiosity of manner with which man, the autocrat, talks of his humble slaves before he has tried his hand at governing them,—before he has received the fiery baptism of suffering, and learned by bitter experience that a perfect woman is not a creature to be found at every street-corner waiting meekly for her ruler.

CHAPTER VI.

TOO MUCH ALONE.

Brown Molly's fetlocks were neatly trimmed by Mr. Jeffson's patient hands. I fancy the old mare would have gone long without a clipping, had it not been George's special pleasure that the animal should be smartened up before he rode her to Conventford. Clipping is not a very pleasant labour; but there is no task so difficult that William Jeffson would have shrunk from it, if its achievement could give George Gilbert happiness.

Brown Molly looked a magnificent creature when George came home, after a hurried round of professional visits, and found her saddled and bridled, at eleven o'clock, on the bright March morning which he had chosen for his journey to Conventford. But though the mare was ready,

and had been ready for a quarter of an hour, there was some slight delay while George ran up to his room,—the room which he had slept in from his earliest boyhood (there were some of his toys, dusty and forgotten, amongst the portmanteaus and hat-boxes at the top of the painted-deal wardrobe),—and was for some little time engaged in changing his neckcloth, brushing his hair and hat, and making other little improvements in his personal appearance.

William Jeffson declared that his young master looked as if he was going straight off to be married, as he rode away out of the stable-yard, with a bright eager smile upon his face, and the spring breezes blowing amongst his hair. He looked the very incarnation of homely, healthy comeliness, the archetype of honest youth and simple English manhood, radiant with the fresh brightness of an unsullied nature, untainted by an evil memory, pure as a new-polished mirror on which no foul breath has ever rested.

He rode away to his fate, self-deluded, and happy in the idea that his journey was a wise

blending of the duties of friendship and the cares of his surgery.

I do not think there can be a more beautiful road in all England than that between Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne and Conventford, and I can scarcely believe that in all England there is an uglier town than Conventford itself. I envy George Gilbert his long ride on that bright March morning, when the pale primroses glimmered among the underwood, and the odour of early violets mingled faintly with the air. The country roads were long avenues, which might have made the glory of a ducal park; and every here and there, between a gap in the budding hedge, a white-walled country villa or grave old red-brick mansion peeped out of some nook of rustic beauty, with shining windows winking in the noontide sun.

Midway between Graybridge and Conventford there is the village of Waverly; the straggling village street over whose quaint Elizabethan roofs the ruined towers of a grand old castle cast their protecting shadows. John of Gaunt was master and founder of the grandest of those old towers,

and Henry the Eighth's wonderful daughter has feasted in the great banqueting-hall, where the ivy hangs its natural garlands round the stone mullions of the Tudor window. The surgeon gave his steed a mouthful of hay and a drink of water before the Waverly Arms, and then sauntered at a foot-pace into the long unbroken arcade which stretches from the quiet village to the very outskirts of the bustling Conventford. George urged Brown Molly into a ponderous kind of canter by and by, and went at a dashing rate till he came to the little turnpike at the end of the avenue, and left fair Elizabethan Midlandshire behind him. Before him there was only the smoky, noisy, poverty-stricken town, with hideous factory-chimneys blackening the air, and three tall spires rising from amongst the crowded roofs high up into the clearer sky.

Mr. Gilbert drew rein on the green, which was quiet enough to-day, though such an uproarious spot in fair-time; he drew rein, and began to wonder what he should do. Should he go to the chemist's in the market-place and get his drugs, and

thence to Mr. Raymond's house, which was at the other end of the town, or rather on the outskirts of the country and beyond the town; or should he go first to Mr. Raymond's by quiet back lanes, which were clear of the bustle and riot of the market-people? To go to the chemist's first would be the wiser course, perhaps; but then it wouldn't be very agreeable to have drugs in his pocket, and to smell of rhubarb and camomile-flowers when he made his appearance before Miss Sleaford. After a good deal of deliberation, George decided on going by the back way to Mr. Raymond's house; and then, as he rode along the lanes and back slums, he began to think that Mr. Raymond would wonder why he called, and would think his interest in the nursery-governess odd, or even intrusive; and from that a natural transition of thought brought him to wonder whether it would not be better to abandon all idea of seeing Miss Sleaford, and to content himself with the purchase of the drugs. While he was thinking of this, Brown Molly brought him into the lane at the end of which Mr. Raymond's house stood, on a gentle

eminence, looking over a wide expanse of grassy fields, a railway-cutting, and a white high-road, dotted here and there by little knots of stunted trees. The country upon this side of Conventford was bleak and bare of aspect as compared to that fair park-like region which I venture to call Elizabethan Midlandshire.

If Mr. Raymond had resembled other people, I daresay he would have been considerably surprised—or, it may be, outraged—by a young gentleman in the medical profession venturing to make a morning call upon his nursery-governess; but as Mr. Charles Raymond was the very opposite of every body else in the world, and as he was a most faithful disciple of Mr. George Combe, and could discover by a glance at the surgeon's head that the young man was neither a profligate nor a scoundrel, he received George as cordially as it was his habit to receive every living creature who had need of his friendliness; and sent Brown Molly away to his stable, and set her master at his ease, before George had quite left off blushing in his first paroxysm of shyness.

"Come into my room," cried Mr. Raymond, in a voice that had more vibration in it than any other voice that ever rang out upon the air; "come into my room. You've had a letter from Sigismund,—the idea of the absurd young dog calling himself Sigismund!—and he's told you all about Miss Sleaford. Very nice girl, but wants to be educated before she can teach; keeps the little ones amused, however, and takes them out in the meadows; a very nice, conscientious little thing; Cautiousness very large; can't get any thing out of her about her past life; turns pale and begins to cry when I ask her questions; has seen a good deal of trouble, I'm afraid. Never mind; we'll try and make her happy. What does her past life matter to us if her head's well balanced? Let me have my pick of the young people in Field Lane, and I'll find you an undeveloped Archbishop of Canterbury; take me into places where the crimes of mankind are only known by their names in the Decalogue, and I'll find you an embryo Greenacre. Miss Sleaford's a very good little girl; but she's got too much

Wonder, and exaggerated Ideality. She opens her big eyes when she talks of her favourite books, and looks up all scared and startled if you speak to her while she's reading."

Mr. Raymond's room was a comfortable little apartment, lined with books from the ceiling to the floor. There were books every where in Mr. Raymond's house; and the master of the house read at all manner of abnormal hours, and kept a candle burning by his bedside in the dead of the night, when every other citizen of Conventford was asleep. He was a bachelor, and the children whom it was Miss Sleaford's duty to educate were a couple of sickly orphans, left by a pale-faced niece of Charles Raymond's,—an unhappy young lady, who seemed only born to be unfortunate, and who had married badly, and lost her husband, and died of consumption, running through all the troubles common to womankind before her twenty-fifth birthday. Of course Mr. Raymond took the children; he would have taken an accidental chimney-sweep's children, if it could have been demonstrated to him that there

was no one else to take them. He buried the pale-faced niece in a quiet suburban cemetery, and took the orphans home to his pretty house at Conventford, and bought black frocks for them, and engaged Miss Sleaford for their education, and made less fuss about the transaction than many men would have done concerning the donation of a ten-pound note.

It was Charles Raymond's nature to help his fellow-creatures. He had been very rich once, the Conventford people said, in those far-off golden days when there were neither strikes nor starvation in the grim old town; and he had lost a great deal of money in the carrying out of sundry philanthropic schemes for the benefit of his fellow-creatures, and was comparatively poor in these latter days. But he was never so poor as to be unable to help other people, or to hold his hand when a mechanics' institution, or a working-men's club, or an evening-school, or a cooking-dépôt, was wanted for the benefit and improvement of Conventford.

And all this time,—while he was the moving

spirit of half-a-dozen committees, while he distributed cast-off clothing, and coals, and tickets for soup, and orders for flannel, and debated the solemn question as to whether Betsy Scrubbs or Maria Tomkins was most in want of a wadded petticoat, or gave due investigation to the rival claims of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Green to the largess of the soup-kitchen,—he was an author, a philosopher, a phrenologist, a metaphysician, writing grave books, and publishing them for the instruction of mankind. He was fifty years of age; but, except that his hair was gray, he had no single attribute of age. That gray hair framed the brightest face that ever smiled upon mankind, and with the liberal sunshine smiled alike on all. George Gilbert had seen Mr. Raymond several times before to-day. Every body in Conventford, or within a certain radius of Conventford, knew Mr. Charles Raymond; and Mr. Charles Raymond knew every body. He looked through the transparent screen which shrouded the young surgeon's thoughts: he looked down into the young man's heart, through depths that

were as clear as limpid water, and saw nothing there but truth and purity. When I say that Mr. Raymond looked into George Gilbert's heart, I use a figure of speech, for it was from the outside of the surgeon's head he drew his deductions; but I like the old romantic fancy, that a good man's heart is a temple of courage, love, and piety—an earthly shrine of all the virtues.

Mr. Raymond's house was a pretty Gothic building, half villa, half cottage, with bay windows opening into a small garden, which was very different from the garden at Camberwell, inasmuch as here all was trimly kept by an indefatigable gardener and factotum. Beyond the garden there were the meadows, only separated from Mr. Raymond's lawn by a low privet hedge; and beyond the meadows the roofs and chimneys of Conventford loomed darkly in the distance.

Charles Raymond took George into the drawing-room by and by, and from the bay window the young man saw Isabel Sleaford once more, as he had seen her first, in a garden. But the scene had a different aspect from that other scene,

which still lingered in his mind, like a picture seen briefly in a crowded gallery. Instead of the pear-trees on the low disorderly grass-plat, the straggling branches green against the yellow sunshine of July, George saw a close-cropped lawn and trim flower-beds, stiff groups of laurel, and bare bleak fields unsheltered from the chill March winds. Against the cold blue sky he saw Isabel's slight figure, not lolling in a garden-chair reading a novel, but walking primly with two pale-faced children dressed in black. A chill sense of pain crept through the surgeon's breast as he looked at the girlish figure, the pale joyless face, the sad dreaming eyes. He felt that some inexplicable change had come to Isabel Sleaford since that July day on which she had talked of her pet authors, and glowed and trembled with childish love for the dear books out of whose pages she took the joys and sorrows of her life.

The three pale faces, the three black dresses, had a desolate look in the cold sunlight. Mr. Raymond tapped at the glass, and beckoned to the nursery-governess.

"Melancholy-looking objects, are they not?" he said to George, as the three girls came towards the window. "I've told my housekeeper to give them plenty of roast meat, not too much done; meat's the best antidote for melancholy."

He opened the window and admitted Isabel and her two pupils.

"Here's a friend come to see you, Miss Sleaford," he said; "a friend of Sigismund's; a gentleman who knew you in London."

George held out his hand, but he saw something like terror in the girl's face as she recognised him; and he fell straightway into a profound gulf of confusion and embarrassment.

"Sigismund asked me to call," he stammered. "Sigismund told me to write and tell him how you were."

Miss Sleaford's eyes filled with tears. The tears came unbidden to her eyes now with the smallest provocation.

"You are all very good to me," she said.

"There, you children, go out into the garden and walk about," cried Mr. Raymond. "You go

with them, Gilbert, and then come in and have some stilton cheese and bottled beer, and tell us all about your Graybridge patients."

Mr. Gilbert obeyed his kindly host. He went out on to the lawn, where the brown shrubs were putting forth their feeble leaflets to be blighted by the chill air of March. He walked by Isabel's side, while the two orphans prowled mournfully here and there amongst the evergreens, and picked the lonely daisies that had escaped the gardener's scythe. George and Isabel talked a little; but the young man was fain to confine himself to a few commonplace remarks about Conventford, and Mr. Raymond, and Miss Sleaford's new duties; for he saw that the least allusion to the old Camberwell life distressed and agitated her. There was not much that these two could talk about as yet. With Sigismund Smith Isabel would have had plenty to say; indeed, it would have been a struggle between the two as to which should do all the talking; but in George Gilbert's company Isabel Sleaford's fancies folded themselves like delicate buds whose fragile petals are shrivelled

by a bracing northern breeze. She knew that Mr. Gilbert was a good young man, kindly disposed towards her, and, after his simple fashion, eager to please her; but she felt rather than knew that he did not understand her, and that in that cloudy region where her thoughts for ever dwelt he could never be her companion. So, after a little of that deliciously original conversation which forms the staple talk of a morning call amongst people who have never acquired the supreme accomplishment called small-talk, George and Isabel returned to the drawing-room, where Mr. Raymond was ready to preside over a banquet of bread-and-cheese and bottled ale; after which refection the surgeon's steed was brought to the door.

"Come and see us again, Gilbert, whenever you've a day in Conventford," Mr. Raymond said, as he shook hands with the surgeon.

George thanked him for his cordial invitation, but he rode away from the house rather depressed in spirit, notwithstanding. How stupid he had been during that brief walk on Mr. Raymond's lawn; how little he had said to Isabel, or she to

him! How dismally the conversation had died away into silence every now and then, only to be revived by some lame question, some miserable remark apropos to nothing,—the idiotic emanation of despair!

Mr. Gilbert rode to an inn near the market-place, where his father had been wont to take his dinner whenever he went to Conventford. George gave Brown Molly into the ostler's custody; and then walked away to the crowded pavement, where the country people were jostling each other in front of shop-windows and open stalls; the broad stony market-place, where the voices of the hawkers were loud and shrill, where the brazen boastings of quack-medicine vendors rang out upon the afternoon air. He walked through the crowd, and rambled away into a narrow back street leading to an old square, where the great church of Conventford stood amidst a stony waste of tombstones, and where the bells that played a hymn-tune when they chimed the hour were booming up in the grand old steeple. The young man went into the stony churchyard, which was lonely enough even

on a market-day, and walked about among the tombs, whiling away the time—for the benefit of Brown Molly, who required considerable rest and refreshment before she set out on the return journey—and thinking of Isabel Sleaford.

He had only seen her twice, and yet already her image had fastened itself with a fatal grip upon his mind, and was planted there—an enduring picture, never again to be blotted out. That evening at Camberwell had been the one romantic episode of this young man's eventless life; Isabel Sleaford the one stranger who had come across his pathway. There were pretty girls, and amiable girls, in Graybridge: but then he had known them all his life. Isabel came to him in her pale young beauty, and all the latent sentimentality —without which youth is hideous—kindled and thrilled into life at the magic spell of her presence. The mystic Venus rises a full-blown beauty from the sea, and man the captive bows down before his divine enslaver. Who would care for a Venus whose cradle he had rocked, whose gradual growth he had watched, the divinity of whose beauty had

perished beneath the withering influence of familiarity?

It was dusk when George Gilbert went to the chemist and received his parcels of drugs. He would not stop to dine at the White Lion, but paid his eighteenpence for Brown Molly's accommodation, and took a hasty glass of ale at the bar before he sprang into the saddle. He rode homeward through the solemn avenue, the dusky cathedral-aisle, the infinite temple, fashioned by the great architect Nature. He rode through the long ghostly avenue, until the twinkling lights at Waverly glimmered on him faintly between the bare branches of the trees.

Isabel Sleaford's new life was a very pleasant one. There was no butter to be fetched, no mysterious errands to the Walworth Road. Every thing was bright and smooth and trim in Mr. Raymond's household. There was a middle-aged housekeeper who reigned supreme, and an industrious maidservant under her sway. Isabel and her sickly charges had two cheerful rooms over

the drawing-room, and took their meals together, and enjoyed the delight of one another's society all day long. The children were rather stupid, but they were very good. They too had known the sharp ills of poverty, the butter-fetching, the blank days in which there was no bright oasis of dinner, the scraps of cold meat and melancholy cups of tea. They told Isabel their troubles of an evening; how poor mamma had cried when the sheriff's officer came in, and said he was very sorry for her, but must take an inventory, and wouldn't leave even papa's picture or the silver spoons that had been grandmamma's. Miss Sleaford put her shoulder to the wheel very honestly, and went through Pinnock's pleasant abridgments of modern and ancient history with her patient pupils. She let them off with a very slight dose of the Heptarchy and the Normans, and even the early Plantagenet monarchs; but she gave them plenty of Anne Boleyn and Mary Queen of Scots,—fair Princess Mary, Queen of France and wife of Thomas Brandon,—Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday.

The children only said "Lor'!" when they

heard of Mademoiselle Corday's heroic adventure: but they were very much interested in the fate of the young princes of the House of York, and amused themselves by a representation of the smothering business with the pillows on the school-room sofa.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Charles Raymond, who had all the interests of Convent-ford to claim his attention, could give much time or trouble to the two pupils or the nursery-governess. He was quite satisfied with Miss Sleaford's head, and was content to intrust his orphan nieces to her care.

"If they were clever children, I should be afraid of her exaggerated ideality," he said; "but they're too stupid to be damaged by any influence of that kind. She's got a very decent moral region—not equal to that young doctor at Graybridge, certainly—and she'll do her duty to the little ones very well, I daresay."

So no one interfered with Isabel or her pupils. The education of association, which would have been invaluable to her, was as much wanting at

Conventford as it had been at Camberwell. She lived alone with her books and the dreams which were born of them, and waited for the prince, the Ernest Maltravers, the Henry Esmond, the Steerforth—it was Steerforth's proud image, and not simple-hearted David's gentle shadow, which lingered in the girl's mind when she shut the book. She was young and sentimental, and it was not the good people upon whom her fancy fixed itself. To be handsome and proud and miserable, was to possess an indisputable claim to Miss Sleaford's worship. She sighed to sit at the feet of a Byron, grand and gloomy and discontented, baring his white brow to the midnight blast, and raving against the baseness and ingratitude of mankind. She pined to be the chosen slave of some scornful creature, who should perhaps ill-treat and neglect her. I think she would have worshipped an aristocratic Bill Sykes, and would have been content to die under his cruel hand, only in the ruined chamber of some Gothic castle, by moonlight, with the distant Alps shimmering whitely before her glazing eyes, instead of in poor Nancy's un-

romantic garret. And then the Count Guilliamme de Syques would be sorry, and put up a wooden cross on the mountain pathway, to the memory of ——, ĀNÁTKH; and he would be found some morning stretched at the foot of that mysterious memorial, with a long black mantle trailing over his king-like form, and an important blood-vessel broken.

There is no dream so foolish, there is no fancy however childish, that did not find lodgment in Isabel Sleaford's mind during the long idle evenings in which she sat alone in her quiet schoolroom, watching the stars kindle faintly in the dusk, and the darkening shadows gathering in the meadows, while feeble lights began to twinkle in the distant streets of Conventford. Sometimes, when her pupils were fast asleep in their white-curtained beds, Izzie stole softly down, and went out into the garden to walk up and down in the fair moonlight; the beautiful moonlight in which Juliet had looked more lovely than the light of day to Romeo's enraptured eyes; in which Hamlet had trembled before his father's ghostly face. She

walked up and down in the moonlight, and thought of all her dreams; and wondered when her life was going to begin. She was getting quite old; yes—she thought of it with a thrill of horror—she was nearly eighteen! Juliet was buried in the tomb of the Capulets before this age, and haughty Beatrix had lived her life, and Florence Dombey was married and settled, and the story all over.

A dull despair crept over this foolish girl as she thought that perhaps her life was to be only a commonplace kind of existence, after all; a blank flat level, along which she was to creep to a nameless grave. She was so eager to be *something*. Oh, why was not there a revolution, that she might take a knife in her hand and go forth to seek the tyrant in his lodging, and then die; so that people might talk of her, and remember her name when she was dead?

I think Isabel Sleaford was just in that frame of mind in which a respectable, and otherwise harmless, young person aims a bullet at some virtuous sovereign, in a paroxysm of insensate yearning for distinction. Miss Sleaford wanted

to be famous. She wanted the drama of her life to begin, and the hero to appear.

Vague, and grand, and shadowy, there floated before her the image of the prince; but, oh, how slow he was to come! Would he ever come? Were there any princes in the world? Were there any of those Beings whose manners and customs her books described to her, but whose mortal semblances she had never seen? The Sleeping Beauty in the woods slumbered a century before the appointed hero came to awaken her. Beauty must wait, and wait patiently, for the coming of her fate. But poor Isabel thought she had waited so long, and as yet there was not even the distant shimmer of the prince's plumes dimly visible on the horizon.

There were reasons why Isabel Sleaford should shut away the memory of her past life, and solace herself with visions of a brighter existence. A little wholesome drudgery might have been good for her, as a homely antidote against the sentimentalism of her nature; but in Mr. Raymond's house she had ample leisure to sit dreaming over

her books, weaving wonderful romances in which she was to be the heroine, and the hero ——?

The hero was the veriest chameleon, inasmuch as he took his colour from the last book Miss Sleaford had been reading. Sometimes he was Ernest Maltravers, the exquisite young aristocrat, with violet eyes and silken hair. Sometimes he was Eugene Aram, dark, gloomy, and intellectual, with that awkward little matter of Mr. Clarke's murder preying upon his mind. At another time he was Steerforth, selfish and haughty and elegant. Sometimes, when the orphans were asleep, Miss Sleaford let down her long black hair before the little looking-glass, and acted to herself in a whisper. She saw her pale face, awful in the dusky glass, her lifted arms, her great black eyes, and she fancied herself dominating a terror-stricken pit. Sometimes she thought of leaving friendly Mr. Raymond, and going up to London with a five-pound note in her pocket, and coming out at one of the theatres as a tragic actress. She would go to the manager, and tell him that she wanted to act. There might be a little difficulty at first, per-

haps, and he would be rather inclined to be doubtful of her powers; but then she would take off her bonnet, and let down her hair, and would draw the long tresses wildly through her thin white fingers—so; she stopped to look at herself in the glass as she did it,—and would cry, "I am not mad; this hair I tear is mine!" and the thing would be done. The manager would exclaim, "Indeed, my dear young lady, I was not prepared for such acting as this. Excuse my emotion; but really, since the days of Miss O'Neil, I don't remember to have witnessed any thing to equal your delivery of that speech. Come to-morrow evening and play Constance. You don't want a rehearsal?—no, of course not; you know every syllable of the part. I shall take the liberty of offering you fifty pounds a-night to begin with, and I shall place one of my carriages at your disposal." Isabel had read a good many novels in which timid young heroines essay their histrionic powers, but she had never read of a dramatically-disposed heroine who had not burst forth a full-blown Mrs. Siddons without so much as the ordeal of a rehearsal.

Sometimes Miss Sleaford thought that her Destiny—she clung to the idea that she had a destiny—designed her to be a poet, an L.E.L.; oh, above all she would have chosen to be L.E.L.; and in the evening, when she had looked over the children's copy-books, and practised a new style of capital B, in order to infuse a dash of variety into the next day's studies, she drew the candles nearer to her, and posed herself, and dipped her pen into the ink, and began to pour forth some melancholy plaint upon the lonely blankness of her life, or some vague invocation of the unknown prince. She rarely finished either the plaint or the invocation, for there was generally some rhythmical difficulty that brought her poetic musings to a dead lock; but she began a great many verses, and spoiled several quires of paper with abortive sonnets, in which "stars" and "streamlets," "dreams" and "fountains," recurred with a frequency which was inimical to originality or variety of style.

The poor lonely untaught child looked right and left for some anchorage on the blank sea of life,

and could find nothing but floating masses of ocean verdure, that drifted her here and there at the wild will of all the winds of heaven. Behind her there was a past that she dared not look back upon or remember; before her lay the unknown future, wrapped in mysterious shadow, grand by reason of its obscurity. She was eager to push onward, to pierce the solemn veil, to tear aside the misty curtain, to penetrate the innermost chamber of the temple.

Late in the night, when the lights of Convent-ford had died out under the starlit sky, the girl lay awake, sometimes looking up at those mystical stars, and thinking of the future; but never once, in any dream or reverie, in any fantastic vision built out of the stories she loved, did the homely image of the Graybridge surgeon find a place.

George Gilbert thought of her, and wondered about her, as he rode Brown Molly in the winding Midlandshire lanes, where the brown hedge-rows were budding, and the whitethorn bursting into blossom. He thought of her by day and by night, and was angry with himself for so thinking; and

then began straightway to consider when he could, with any show of grace, present himself once more before Mr. Raymond's Gothic porch at Convent-ford.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE BRIDGE.

WHILE George Gilbert was thinking of Isabel Sleaford's pale face and black eyes; while, in his long rides to and fro among the cottages of his parish-patients, he solemnly debated as to whether he ought to call upon Mr. Raymond when next he went to Conventford, or whether he ought to go to Conventford for the express purpose of paying his respects to Mr. Raymond,—the hand of Fate turned the wavering balance; and the makeweight which she threw into the scale was no heavier than the ordinary half-ounce of original composition which Government undertakes to convey, not exactly from Indus to the Pole, but from the Land's End to the Highlands, for the small charge of a penny. While the young sur-

geon was hesitating on the brink of the great ocean, dipping the point of his foot into the crawling surf, only to draw back affrighted from the rush of the advancing wave; tempted by the freshness of the ocean spray, eager to plunge, yet doubtful of all that wide unknown expanse, which, in the sunshine, seemed a sea of gold, but, lashed by storms, and blackening with the darkening of the heavens, might become so terrible a grave; —while George Gilbert, in plainer words, hesitated and doubted, and argued and debated with himself, after the manner of every prudent home-bred young man who begins to think that he loves well, and sadly fears he may not love wisely,— Destiny, under the form of a friend, gave him a push, and he went souse over head and ears into the roaring ocean, and there was nothing left for him but to swim as best he might towards the undiscovered shore upon the other side.

The letter from Sigismund was dated Oakbank, Conventford, May 23d, 1853.

"Dear George," wrote the author of *The*

Brand upon the Shoulder-blade, "I'm down here for a few days with my uncle Charles; and we've arranged a picnic in Lord Hurstonleigh's grounds, and we want you to join us. So, if your patients are not the most troublesome people in the world, you can give yourself a holiday, and meet us on Wednesday morning, at twelve, if fine, at the Waverly Road lodge-gate to Hurstonleigh Park. Mrs. Pidgers—Pidgers is my uncle's housekeeper; a regular old dear, and *such* a hand at pie-crusts! —is going to pack up a basket,—and I know what Pidgers's baskets are,—and we shall bring plenty of sparkling, because, when my uncle does this sort of thing, he *does* do it; and we're to drink tea at one of Lord Hurstonleigh's model cottages, in his model village, with a model old woman, who's had all manner of prizes for the tidiest dust-holes, and the whitest hearth-stones, and the neatest knife-boards, and all that kind of thing; and we're going to make a regular holiday of it; and I shall forget that there's such a creature as 'the Demon of the Galleys' in the world, and that I'm a number behind with him,

—which I am,—and the artist is waiting for a subject for his next cut.

"The orphans are coming, of course, and Miss Sleaford; and, oh, by the by, I want you to tell me all about poisoning by strychnine, because I think I shall do a case or two in *The D. of the G.*

"Twelve o'clock, sharp time, remember! We come in a fly. You can leave your horse at Waverly.—Yours, S. S."

Yes; Fate, impatient perhaps of any wavering of the balance in so insignificant a matter as George Gilbert's destiny, threw this penny-post letter into the scale, and, lo! it was turned. The young man read the letter over and over again, till it was crumpled and soiled with much unfolding and refolding, and taking out of, and putting back into, his waistcoat-pocket. A picnic! a picnic in the Hurstonleigh grounds, with Isabel Sleaford! Other people were to be of the party; but George Gilbert scarcely remembered that. He saw himself, with Isabel by his side,

wandering along the winding pathways, straying away into mysterious arcades of verdure, where the low branches of the trees would meet above their heads, and shut them in from all the world. He fancied himself talking to Mr. Sleaford's daughter as he never had talked, nor was ever likely to talk, with any voice audible to mortal ears; he laid out and arranged that day as we are apt to arrange the days that are to come, and which—Heaven help our folly and presumption!—are so different when they do come from the dreams we have dreamed about them. Mr. Gilbert lived that May holiday over and over again between the Monday afternoon on which he received Sigismund's letter, and the appointed Wednesday morning. He lay awake at night, when his day's work was done, thinking of Isabel, and what she would say to him, and how she would look at him, until those fancied words and looks thrilled him to the heart's core, and he was deluded by the thought that it was all a settled thing, and that his love was returned. His love! Did he love her, then, al-

ready—this pale-faced young person, whom he had only seen twice; who might be a Florence Nightingale, or a Madame de Laffarge, for all that he knew either one way or the other? Yes, he loved her; the wondrous flower that never yet "thrived by the calendar" had burst into full bloom. He loved this young woman, and believed in her, and was ready to bring her to his simple home whenever she pleased to come thither; and had already pictured her sitting opposite to him in the little parlour, making weak tea for him in a Britannia-metal teapot, sewing commonplace buttons upon his commonplace shirts, debating with Mrs. Jeffson as to whether there should be roast beef or boiled mutton for the two-o'clock dinner, sitting up alone in that most uninteresting little parlour when the surgeon's patients were tiresome and insisted upon being ill in the night, waiting to preside over little suppers of cold meat and pickles, bread-and-cheese and celery. Yes; George pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a domestic story as this, and had no power to divine that there was any in-

congruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the heroine and the story. Alas, poor Izzie! and are all your fancies, all the pretty stories woven out of your novels, all your long day-dreams about Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday, Edith Dombey and Ernest Maltravers,—all your foolish pictures of a modern Byron, fever-stricken at Missolonghi, and tended by you; a new Napoleon, exiled to St. Helena, and followed, perhaps liberated, by you,—are they all come to this? Are none of the wonderful things that happen to women ever to happen to you? Are you never to be Charlotte Corday, and die for your country? Are you never to wear ruby velvet, and diamonds in your hair, and to lure some recreant Carker to a foreign hostelry, and there denounce and scorn him? Are all the pages of the great book of life to be closed upon you—you, who seem to yourself predestined, by reason of so many dreams and fancies, to such a wonderful existence? Is all the mystic cloudland of your dreams to collapse and shrivel into this,—a commonplace

square-built cottage at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, with a commonplace country surgeon for your husband?

George Gilbert was waiting at the low white gate before the ivy-covered lodge on the Waverly Road when the fly from Conventford drove up, with Sigismund Smith sitting beside the coachman, and questioning him about a murder that had been committed in the neighbourhood ten years before; and Mr. Raymond, Miss Sleaford, and the orphans inside. The surgeon had been waiting at the gate for a quarter of an hour, and he had been up ever since six o'clock that morning, riding backwards and forwards amongst his patients, doing a day's work in a few hours. He had been home to dress, of course, and wore his newest and most fashionable clothes, and was, in fact, a living realisation of one of the figures in a fly-blown fashion-plate for June 1852, still exhibited in the window of a Graybridge tailor. He wore a monthly rosebud in his buttonhole, and he carried a bunch of spring flowers,—jonquils and polyanthuses, pink hawthorn, peonies, and

sweetbrier,—which Mr. Jeffson had gathered and tied up, with a view to their presentation to Isabel,—although there were better flowers in Mr. Raymond's garden, as George reminded his faithful steward.

"Don't thee tew thyself about that, Master Jarge," said the Yorkshireman; "th' young wench 'll like the flowers if thoo givest 'em til her."

Of course it never for a moment entered into Mr. Jeffson's mind that his young master's attentions could be otherwise than welcome and agreeable to any woman living, least of all to a forlorn young damsel who was obliged to earn her bread amongst strangers.

"I'd like to see Miss Sleaford, Master Jarge,' Mr. Jeffson said, in an insinuating manner, as George gathered up the reins and patted Brown Molly's neck, preparatory to riding away from the low white gate of his domain.

George blushed like the peonies that formed the centre of his nosegay.

"I don't know why you should want to see

Miss Sleaford any more than other girls, Jeff," he said.

"Well, never you mind why, Master Jarge; I *should* like to see her; I'd give a deal to see her."

"Then we'll try and manage it, Jeff. We're to drink tea at Hurstonleigh; and we shall be leaving there, I suppose, as soon as it's dark—between seven and eight o'clock, I daresay. You might ride the gray pony to Waverly, and bring Brown Molly on to Hurstonleigh, and stop at the alehouse—there's an alehouse, you know, though it *is* a model village — until I'm ready to come home; and you can leave the horses with the ostler, you know, and stroll about the village,—and you're sure to find us."

"Yes, yes, Master Jarge; I'll manage it."

So George was at his post a quarter of an hour before the fly drove up to the gate. He was there to open the door of the vehicle, and to give his hand to Isabel when she alighted. He felt the touch of her fingers resting briefly on his arm, and trembled and blushed like a

girl as he met the indifferent gaze of her great black eyes. Nobody took any notice of his embarrassment. Mr. Raymond and his nephew were busy with the hampers that had been stowed under the seats of the fly, and the orphans were employed in watching their elders,—for to them the very cream of the picnic was in those baskets.

There was a boy at the lodge who was ready to take the basket whithersoever Mr. Raymond should direct; so all was settled very quickly. The driver received his instructions respecting the return journey, and went rumbling off to Hurstonleigh to refresh himself and his horse. The lad went on before the little party, with the baskets swinging on either side of him as he went; and in the bustle of these small arrangements George Gilbert found courage to offer Isabel his arm. She took it without hesitation, and Sigismund placed himself on the other side of her. Mr. Raymond went on before with the orphans, who affected the neighbourhood of the baskets; and the three young people followed, walking slowly over the grass.

Isabel had put off her mourning. She had never had but one black dress, poor child; and that being worn out, she was fain to fall back upon her ordinary costume. If she had looked pretty in the garden at Camberwell, with tumbled hair and a dingy dress, she looked beautiful to-day, in clean muslin, fresh and crisp, fluttering in the spring breezes as she walked, and with her hair smoothly banded under a broad-leaved straw-hat. Her face brightened with the brightness of the sunshine and the charm of the landscape; her step grew light and buoyant as she walked upon the springing turf. Her eyes lit up by and by, when the little party came to a low iron gate, beyond which there was a grove, a winding woodland patch, and undulating glades, and craggy banks half hidden under foliage, and, in a deep cleft below, a brawling waterfall for ever rushing over moss-grown rockwork, and winding far away to meet the river.

"Oh, how beautiful it is!" cried Isabel; "how beautiful!"

She was a Cockney, poor child, and had spent the best part of her life amidst the suburban districts of Camberwell and Peckham. All this Midlandshire beauty burst upon her like a sudden revelation of Paradise. Could the Garden of Eden have been more beautiful than this wood land grove?—where the ground was purple with wild hyacinths that grew under beeches and oaks centuries old; where the sunlight and shadows flickered on the mossy pathways; where the guttural warble of the blackbirds made perpetual music in the air. George looked wonderingly at the girl's rapt countenance, her parted lips, that were faintly tremulous with the force of her emotion.

"I did not think there could be any place in England so beautiful," she said by and by, when George disturbed her with some trite remark upon the scene. "I thought it was only in Italy and in Greece, and those sort of places—where Childe Harold went—that it was beautiful like this. It makes one feel as if one could never go back to the world again, doesn't it?" she asked naïvely.

George was fain to confess that, although the grove was very beautiful, it inspired him with no desire to turn hermit, and take up his abode therein. But Isabel hardly heard what he said to her. She was looking away into mysterious vistas of light and shadow, and thinking that in such a spot as this the hero of a woman's life might appear in all his shining glory. If she could meet him now, this wonderful unknown being—the Childe Harold, the Lara, of her life! What if it was to be so? what if she was to meet him now, and the story was appointed to begin to-day,—this very day,—and all her life henceforth was to be changed? The day was like the beginning of a story, somehow, inasmuch as it was unlike the other days of her life. She had thought of the holiday, and dreamt about it even more foolishly than George had done; for there had been some foundation for the young man's visions, while hers had been altogether baseless. What if Lord Hurstonleigh should happen to be strolling in his grove, and should see her and rescue her from death by drowning, or a mad

bull, or something of that sort, and thereupon fall in love with her? Nothing was more life-like or likely, according to Izzie's experience of three-volume novels. Unhappily she discovered from Mr. Raymond that Lord Hurstonleigh was an elderly married man, and was, moreover, resident in the south of France; so *that* bright dream was speedily shattered. But there is no point of the compass from which a hero may not come. There was hope yet; there was hope that this bright spring-day might not close as so many days had closed upon the same dull record, the same empty page.

Mr. Raymond was in his highest spirits to-day. He liked to be with young people, and was younger than the youngest of them in his fresh enjoyment of all that is bright and beautiful upon earth. He devoted himself chiefly to the society of his orphan *protégées*, and contrived to impart a good deal of information to them in a pleasant easy-going manner, that took the bitterness out of those Pierian waters, for which the orphans had very small affection. They were stupid and

unimpressionable; but, then, were they not the children of that unhappy consumptive niece of his, who had acquired, by reason of her many troubles, a kind of divine right to become a burden upon happy people?

"If she had left me such an orphan as that girl Isabel, I would have thanked her kindly for dying," Mr. Raymond mused. "That girl has mental imitation,—the highest and rarest faculty of the human brain,—ideality, and comparison. What could I not make of such a girl as that? And yet—"

Mr. Raymond only finished the sentence with a sigh. He was thinking that, after all, these bright faculties might not be the best gifts for a woman. It would have been better, perhaps, for Isabel to have possessed the organ of pudding-making and stocking-darning, if those useful accomplishments are represented by an organ. The kindly phrenologist was thinking that perhaps the highest fate life held for that pale girl with the yellow tinge in her eyes was to share the home of a simple-hearted country surgeon, and

rear his children to be honest men and virtuous women.

"I suppose that *is* the best," Mr. Raymond said to himself.

He had dismissed the orphans now, and had sent them on to walk with Sigismund Smith, who kindly related to them the story of *Lilian the Deserted*, with such suppressions and emendations as rendered the romance suitable to their tender years. The philosopher of Conventford had got rid of the orphans, and was strolling by himself in those delicious glades, swinging his stick as he went, and throwing up his head every now and then to scent all the freshness of the warm spring air.

"Yes, poor little girl," he mused; "I suppose it *is* the best. Society wants commonplace people; and I really doubt if it might not very comfortably dispense with those gifted beings, who are perpetually running about with the flaring torches men call genius, setting honest men's hayricks—in the way of old prejudices and time-honoured delusions—on fire. There are people

certainly who may be trusted with one of those dangerous torches, and who straightway go to work to climb the highest mountain in the land, and set their light aloft to be a beacon for mankind; but then there are so many who are never any thing better than children playing with fire, and who are so eager to distinguish themselves, that they must needs set alight every thing they see.

"Poor little orphan child! will any body ever fathom her fancies or understand her dreams Will she marry that good, sheepish country surgeon, who has fallen in love with her? He can give her a home and a shelter; and she seems such a poor friendless little creature, just the sort of girl to get into some kind of mischief if she were left to herself. Perhaps it's about the best thing that could happen to her. I should like to have fancied a brighter fate for her, a life with more colour in it. She's so pretty—*so* pretty; and when she talks, and her face lights up, a sort of picture comes into my mind of what she would be in a great saloon, with clusters of lights about

her, and masses of shimmering colour, making a gorgeous background for her pale young beauty; and brilliant men and women clustering round her, to hear her talk and see her smile. I can see her like this; and then, when I remember what her life is likely to be, I begin to feel sorry for her, just as if she were some fair young nun, foredoomed to be buried alive by and by. Sometimes I have had a fancy that if *he* were to come home and see her—but that's an old busybody's dream. When did a matchmaker ever create any thing but matrimonial confusion and misery? I daresay Beatrice kept her word, and *did* make Benedick wretched. No; Miss Sleaford must marry whom she may, and be happy or miserable, according to the doctrine of averages; and as for *him*—"

Mr. Raymond stopped; and seeing the rest of the party happily engaged in gathering hyacinths under the low branches of the trees, he seated himself upon a clump of fallen timber, and took a book out of his pocket. It was a book that had been sent by post, for the paper wrapper was still about it. It was a neat little volume, bound in

glistening green cloth, with uncut edges, and the gilt-letter title on the back of the volume set forth that the book contained "An Alien's Dreams." An alien's dreams could be nothing but poetry; and as the name of the poet was not printed under the title, it was perhaps only natural that Mr. Raymond should not open the book immediately, but should sit turning and twisting the volume about in his hands, and looking at it with a contemptuous expression of countenance.

"An alien!" he exclaimed; "why, in the name of all the affectations of the present day, should a young man with fifteen thousand a-year, and one of the finest estates in Midlandshire, call himself an alien? 'An Alien's Dreams'—and such dreams! I had a look at them this morning, without cutting the leaves. It's always a mistake to cut the leaves of young people's poetry. Such dreams! Surely no alien could have been afflicted with any thing like them, unless he was perpetually eating heavy suppers of underdone pork, or drinking bad wine, or neglecting the ventilation of his bedroom. Imperfect ventilation has a good

deal to do with it, I daresay. To think that Roland Lansdell should write such stuff—such a clever young man as he is, too—such a generous-hearted, high-minded young fellow, who might be—"

Mr. Raymond opened the volume in a very gingerly fashion, almost as if he expected something unpleasant might crawl out of it, and looked in a sideways manner between the leaves, muttering the first line or so of a poem, and then skipping on to another, and giving utterance to every species of contemptuous ejaculation between whiles.

"Imogen!" he exclaimed; "'To Imogen!' As if any body was ever called Imogen out of Shakespeare's play and Monk Lewis's ballad! 'To Imogen:'

> 'Do you ever think of me, proud and cruel Imogen
> As I think, ah! sadly think, of thee—
> When the shadows darken on the misty lea, Imogen,
> And the low light dies behind the sea?'

'Broken!' 'Shattered!' 'Blighted!' Lively titles to tempt the general reader! Here's a nice sort of thing:

'Like an actor in a play,
Like a phantom in a dream,
Like a lost boat left to stray
Rudderless adown the stream,—
This is what my life has grown, Ida Lee,
Since thy false heart left me lone, Ida Lee.
And I wonder sometimes when the laugh is loud,
And I wonder at the faces of the crowd,
And the strange fantastic measures that they tread,
Till I think at last I must be dead—
Till I half believe that I am dead.'

And to think that Roland Lansdell should waste his time in writing this sort of thing! And here's his letter, poor boy,—his long rambling letter,—in which he tells me how he wrote the verses, and how writing them was a kind of consolation to him,—a safety-valve for so much passionate anger against a world that doesn't exactly harmonise with the Utopian fancies of a young man with fifteen thousand a-year and nothing to do. If some rightful heir would turn up, in the person of one of Roland's gamekeepers, now, and denounce my young friend as a wrongful heir, and turn him out of doors bag and baggage, and with very little bag and baggage, after the manner of those delightful melodramas which hold the mirror up to

nature so exactly, what a blessing it would be for the author of 'An Alien's Dreams'! If he could only find himself without a sixpence in the world, what a noble young soldier in the great battle of life, what a triumphant hero, he might be! But as it is, he is nothing better than a colonel of militia, with a fine uniform, and a long sword that is only meant for show. My poor Roland! my poor Roland!" Mr. Raymond murmured sadly, as he dropped the little volume back into his pocket; "I am so sorry that you too should be infected with the noxious disease of our time, the fatal cynicism that transforms youth into a malady for which age is the only cure."

But he had no time to waste upon any regretful musings about Mr. Roland Lansdell, sole master of Lansdell Priory, one of the finest seats in Midlandshire, and who was just now wandering somewhere in Greece, upon a Byronic kind of tour that had lasted upwards of six months, and was likely to last much longer.

It was nearly three o'clock now, and high time for the opening of the hampers, Mr. Ray-

mond declared, when he rejoined the rest of the party, much to the delight of the orphans, who were always hungry, and who ate so much, and yet remained so pale and skeleton-like of aspect, that they presented a pair of perpetual phenomena to the eye of the physiologist. The baskets had been carried to a little ivy-sheltered arbour, perched high above the waterfall; and here Mr. Raymond unpacked them, bringing out his treasures one after another; first a tongue, then a pair of fowls, a packet of anchovy sandwiches, a great poundcake (at sight of which the eyes of the orphans glistened), delicate caprices in the way of pastry, semi-transparent biscuits, and a little block of stilton cheese, to say nothing of sundry bottles of Madeira and sparkling Burgundy.

Perhaps there never was a merrier party. To eat cold chicken and drink sparkling Burgundy in the open air on a bright May afternoon is always an exhilarating kind of thing, though the scene of your picnic may be the bleakest of the Sussex Downs, or the dreariest of the Yorkshire

Wolds; but to drink the sparkling wine in that little arbour at Hurstonleigh, with the brawling of the waterfall keeping time to your laughter, the shadows of patriarchal oaks sheltering you from all the outer world, is the very *ultima Thule* of bliss in the way of a picnic. And then Mr. Raymond's companions were all so young! It was so easy for them to leave all the Past on the threshold of that lovely grove, and to narrow their lives into the life of that one bright day. Isabel forgot that she had a Destiny, and consented to be happy in a simple girlish way, without a thought of the prince who was so long coming.

It may be that the sparkling Burgundy had something to do with George Gilbert's enthusiasm; but, by and by, after the débris of the dinner had been cleared away, and the little party lingered round the rustic table, talking with that expansion of thought and eloquence of language which is so apt to result from the consumption of effervescing wines in the open air, the young surgeon thought that all the earth could scarcely hold a more lovely creature than the girl who sat

opposite to him, with her head resting against the rustic woodwork of the arbour, and her hat lying on her knee. She did not say very much, in comparison with Sigismund and Mr. Raymond, who were neither of them indifferent hands at talking; but when she spoke, there was generally something vague and dreamy in her words,—something that set George wondering about her anew, and made him admire her more than ever. He forgot all the dictates of prudence now; he was false to all the grand doctrines of young manhood; he only remembered that Isabel Sleaford was the loveliest creature upon earth; he only knew that he loved her, and that his love, like all true love, was mingled with modest doubtfulness of his own merits, and exaggerated deference for hers. He loved her as purely and truly as if he had been able to express his passion in the noblest poem ever written; but not being able to express it, his love and himself seemed alike tame and commonplace.

I must not dwell too long on this picnic, though it seemed half a lifetime to George Gilbert, for

he walked with Isabel through the lanes between Hurstonleigh grove and Hurstonleigh village, and he loitered with her in the little churchyard at Hurstonleigh, and stood upon the bridge beneath which the Wayverne crept like a ribbon of silver, winding in and out among the rushes. He lingered there by her side while the orphans and Sigismund and Mr. Raymond were getting tea ready at the model cottage, and putting the model old woman's wits into such a state of "flustrification," as she herself expressed it, that she could scarcely hold the tea-kettle, and was in imminent peril of breaking one of her best "chaney" saucers, produced from a corner cupboard in honour of her friend and patron, Charles Raymond.

George loitered on the little stone bridge with Isabel, and somehow or other, still emboldened by the sparkling Burgundy, his passion all of a sudden found a voice, and he told her that he loved her, and that his highest hope upon earth was the hope of winning her for his wife.

I suppose that simple little story must be a

pretty story, in its way; for when a woman hears it for the first time, she is apt to feel kindly disposed to the person who recites it, however poorly or tamely he may tell his tale. Isabel listened with a most delightful complacency; not because she reciprocated George's affection for her, but because this was the first little bit of romance in her life, and she felt that the story was beginning all at once, and that she was going to be a heroine. She felt this; and with this a kind of grateful liking for the young man at her side, through whose agency all these pleasant feelings came to her. Did she love him? Alas! she had no better knowledge of that passion than the knowledge she had gathered from her books, and that was at the best so conflicting in its nature, that it was scarcely wonderful if her reading left her adrift upon a vast sea of conjecture. She thought that it was pleasant to have this young man by her side, beseeching her, and worshipping her in the most orthodox fashion. There was something contagious in George Gilbert's agitation to this inexperienced girl, who had not yet

learned the highest lesson of civilisation—utter indifference to the sensations of other people. Her hand trembled a little when he took the shy fingers timidly in his own; and she stole a glance at him, and thought that he was almost as good-looking as Mr. Hablot Browne's portrait of Walter Gay; and that, if she had only a father to strike her and turn her out of doors, the story of her life might be very tolerable, after all. And all this time George was pleading with her, and arguing, from her blushes and her silence, that his suit was not hopeless. Emboldened by the girl's tacit encouragement, he grew more and more eloquent, and went on to tell her how he had loved her from the first; yes, from that first summer's afternoon, when he had seen her sitting under the pear-trees in the old-fashioned garden, with the low yellow light behind her.

"Of course I didn't know then that I loved you, Isabel—oh, may I call you Isabel? it is such a pretty name. I have written it over and over and over on the leaves of a blotting-book at home, very often without knowing that I was writing it.

I only thought at first that I admired you, because you are so beautiful, and so different from other beautiful women; and then, when I was always thinking of you, and wondering about you, I wouldn't believe that it was because I loved you. It is only to-day, this dear, happy day, that has made me understand what I have felt all along; and now I know that I have loved you from the first, Isabel, dear Isabel, from the very first."

All this was quite as it should be. Isabel's heart fluttered like the wings of a young bird that essays its first flight.

"This is what it is to be a heroine," she thought, as she looked down at the coloured pebbles, the floating river-weeds, under the clear rippling water; and yet knew all the time, by virtue of feminine second-sight, that George Gilbert was gazing at her and adoring her. She didn't like *him*, but she liked him to be there talking to her. The words she heard for the first time were delightful to her because of their novelty, but they took no charm from the lips that

spoke them. Any other good-looking, respectably-dressed young man would have been quite as much to her as George Gilbert was. But then she did not know this. It was so very easy for her to mistake her pleasure in the "situation;" the rustic bridge, the rippling water, the bright spring twilight, even the faint influence of that one glass of sparkling Burgundy, and, above all, the sensation of being a heroine for the first time in her life—it was so terribly easy to mistake all these for that which she did not feel,—a regard for George Gilbert.

While the young man was still pleading, while she was still listening to him, and blushing and glancing shyly at him out of those wonderful tawny-coloured eyes, which seemed black just now under the shadow of their drooping lashes, Sigismund and the orphans appeared at the distant gate of the churchyard whooping and hallooing, to announce that the tea was all ready.

"Oh, Isabel!" cried George, "they are coming, and it may be ever so long before I see you again alone. Isabel, dear Isabel! do tell me

that you will make me happy—tell me that you will be my wife!"

He did not ask her if she loved him; he was too much in love with her—too entirely impressed with her grace and beauty, and his own inferiority—to tempt his fate by such a question. If she would marry him, and let him love her, and by and by reward his devotion by loving him a little, surely that would be enough to satisfy his most presumptuous wishes.

"Dear Isabel, you will marry me, won't you? You can't mean to say no,—you would have said it before now. You would not be so cruel as to let me hope, even for a minute, if you meant to disappoint me."

"I have known you—you have known me—such a short time," the girl murmured.

"But long enough to love you with a love that will last all my life," George answered eagerly. "I shall have no thought except to make you happy, Isabel. I know that you are so beautiful that you ought to marry a very different fellow from me,—a man who could give you a grand

house, and carriages and horses, and all that sort of thing; but he could never love you better than I, and he mightn't love you as well, perhaps; and I'll work for you, Isabel, as no man ever worked before. You shall never know what poverty is, darling, if you will be my wife."

"I shouldn't mind being poor," Isabel answered dreamily.

She was thinking that Walter Gay had been poor, and that the chief romance of Florence's life had been the quiet wedding in the little City church, and the long sea-voyage with her young husband. This sort of poverty was almost as nice as poor Edith's miserable wealth, with diamonds flung about and trampled upon, and ruby-velvet for every-day wear.

"I shouldn't so much mind being poor," repeated the girl; for she thought, if she didn't marry a duke or a Dombey, it would be at least something to experience the sentimental phase of poverty.

George Gilbert seized upon the words.

"Ah, then, you will marry me, dearest Isabel?

you will marry me, my own darling—my beautiful wife?"

He was almost startled by the intensity of his own feelings, as he bent down and kissed the little ungloved hand lying on the moss-grown stonework of the bridge.

"Oh, Isabel, if you could only know how happy you have made me! if you could only know—"

She looked at him with a startled expression in her face. Was it all settled, then, so suddenly—with so little consideration? Yes, it was all settled; she was beloved with one of those passions that endure for a lifetime. George had said something to that effect. The story had begun, and she was a heroine.

"Good gracious me!" cried Mr. Smith, as he bounded on the parapet of the little bridge, and disported himself there in the character of an amateur Blondin; "if the model old woman who has had so many prizes—we've been looking at her diplomas, framed and glazed, in a parlour that I couldn't have believed to exist out of *Lilian*

the Deserted (who begins life as the cottager's daughter, you know, and elopes with the Squire in top-boots out of a diamond-paned window—and I've been trying the model old woman's windows, and Lilian couldn't have done it),—but I was about to remark, that if the old woman hasn't had a prize for a model temper, you two will catch it for keeping the tea waiting. Why, Izzie, what's the matter? you and George are both looking as spooney as—is it, eh?—yes, it is; isn't it? Hooray! Didn't I see it from the first?" cried Mr. Smith, striking an attitude upon the balustrade, and pointing down to the two blushing faces with a triumphant finger. "When George asked me for your letter, Izzie,—the little bit of a letter you wrote me when you left Camberwell,—didn't I see him fold it up as gingerly as if it had been a fifty-pound note, and slip it into his waistcoat-pocket, and then try to look as if he hadn't done it? Do you think I wasn't fly, then? A pretty knowledge of human nature I should have, if I couldn't see through that. The creator of Octavio Montefiasco, the Demon of the Galleys,

flatters himself that he understands the obscurest diagnostic of the complaint commonly designated 'spoons.' Don't be downhearted, George," exclaimed Sigismund, jumping suddenly off the parapet of the bridge, and extending his hand to his friend. "Accept the congratulations of one who, with a heart long ber-lighted by the ber-lasting in-fer-luence of ker-rime, can-er yet-er feel a generous ther-rob in unison with virr-tue."

After this they all left the bridge, and went straight to the little cottage, where Mr. Raymond had been holding a species of Yankee levee, for the reception of the model villagers, every one of whom knew him, and required his advice on some knotty point of law, medicine, or domestic economy. The tea was laid upon a little round table, close to the window, in the full light of the low evening sun. Isabel sat with her back to that low western light, and George sat next to her, staring at her in a silent rapture, and wondering at himself for his own temerity in having asked her to be his wife. That tiresome Sigismund called Mr. Raymond aside, before sitting down to tea, on the

pretence of showing him a highly-coloured representation of Joseph and his Brethren, with a strong family likeness between the brethren; and told him in a loud whisper what had happened on the little bridge. So it was scarcely wonderful that poor George and Isabel took their tea in silence, and were rather awkward in the handling of their tea-cups. But they were spared any further congratulations from Sigismund, as that young gentleman found it was as much as he could do to hold his own against the orphans in the demolition of the poundcake, to say nothing of a lump of honeycomb which the model old woman produced for the delectation of the visitors.

The twilight deepened presently, and the stars began to glimmer faintly in an opal-tinted sky. Mr. Raymond, Sigismund, and the orphans employed themselves in packing the baskets with the knives, plates, and glasses which had been used for the picnic. The fly was to pick them all up at the cottage. Isabel stood in the little doorway, looking dreamily out at the village, the dim lights twinkling in the casement windows, the lazy cattle

standing in the pond upon the green, and a man holding a couple of horses before the door of the little inn.

"That man with the horses is Jeffson, my father's gardener; I scarcely like to call him a servant, for he is a kind of connexion of my poor mother's family," George said, with a little confusion; for he thought that perhaps Miss Sleaford's pride might take alarm at the idea of any such kindred between her future husband and his servant; "and he is *such* a good fellow! And what do you think, Isabel?" the young man added, dropping his voice to a whisper; "poor Jeffson has come all the way from Graybridge on purpose to see you, because he has heard me say that you are very beautiful; and I think he guessed ever so long ago that I had fallen in love with you. Would you have any objection to walk over yonder and see him, Isabel, or shall I call him here?"

"I'll go to him, if you like; I should like very much to see him," the girl answered.

She took the arm George offered her. Of

course it was only right that she should take his arm. It was all a settled thing now.

"Miss Sleaford has come to see you, Jeff," the young man said, when they came to where the Yorkshireman was standing.

Poor Jeff had very little to say upon this rather trying occasion. He took off his hat, and stood bareheaded, smiling and blushing—as George spoke of him and praised him—yet all the while keeping a sharp watch upon Isabel's face. He could see that pale girlish face very well in the evening light, for Miss Sleaford had left her hat in the cottage, and stood bareheaded, with her face turned towards the west, while George rambled on about Jeff and his old school-days, when Jeff and he had been such friends and playfellows.

But the fly from Conventford came rumbling out of the inn-yard as they stood there, and this was a signal for Isabel to hurry back to the cottage. She held out her hand to Mr. Jeffson as she wished him good-night, and then went back, still attended by George, who handed her into the

fly presently, and wished her good-night in a very commonplace manner; for he was a young man whose feelings hid themselves from indifferent eyes, and, indeed, only appeared under the influence of extreme emotion.

CHAPTER VIII.

ABOUT POOR JOE TILLET'S YOUNG WIFE.

GEORGE went back to the Seven Stars, where Mr. Jeffson was waiting with the horses. He went back, after watching the open vehicle drive away; he went back with his happiness, which was so new and strange, he thought a fresh life was to begin for him from this day, and would have almost expected to find the diseases of his patients miraculously cured, and a new phase of existence opening for them as well as for himself.

He was going to be married; he was going to have this beautiful young creature for his wife. He thought of her; and the image of this pale-faced girl, sitting in the little parlour at Graybridge waiting to receive him when he came home from his patients, was such an overpower-

ing vision, that his brain reeled as he contemplated it. Was it true—could it be true—that all this inexpressible happiness was to be his?

By and by, when he was riding Brown Molly slowly along the shadowy lanes that lie between Hurstonleigh and Waverly, his silent bliss overflowed his heart and sought to utter itself in words. William Jeffson had always been George's confidant; why should he not be so now, when the young man had such need of some friendly ear to which to impart his happiness?

Somehow or other the Yorkshireman did not seem so eager as usual to take his part in his master's pleasure; he had seemed to hang back a little; for, under ordinary circumstances, George would have had no occasion to break the ice. But to-night Mr. Jeffson seemed bent on keeping silence, and George was obliged to hazard a preliminary question.

"What do you think of her, Jeff?" he asked.

"What do I think to who, Master Jarge?" demanded the Yorkshireman in his simple vernacular.

"Why, Isa—Miss Sleaford, of course," answered George rather indignantly: was there any other woman in the world whom he could possibly think of or speak of to-night?

Mr. Jeffson was silent for some moments, as if the question related to so profound a subject that he had to descend into the furthest depths of his mind before he could answer it. He was silent: and the slow trampling of the horses' hoofs along the lane, and the twittering of some dissipated bird far away in the dim woodland, were the only sounds that broke the evening stillness.

"She's rare an' pretty, Master Jarge," the philosopher said at last, in a very thoughtful tone; "I a'most think I never see any one so pretty; though it isn't that high-coloured sort of prettiness they think so much to in Graybridge. She's still and white, somehow, like the images in York Minster; and her eyes seem far away as you look at her. Yes, she is rare an' pretty."

"I've told her how I love her; and—and you like her, Jeff, don't you?" asked George, in a rapture of happiness that was stronger than his

native shyness. "You like her, and she likes you, Jeff, and will like you better as she comes to know you more. And she's going to be my wife, old Jeff!"

The young man's voice grew tremulous as he made this grand announcement. Whatever enthusiasm there was in his nature seemed concentrated in the emotions of this one day. He had loved for the first time, and declared his love. His true and constant heart, that wondrous aloe which was to bear a single flower, had burst into sudden blossom, and all the vigour of the root was in that one bright bloom. The aloe-flower might bloom steadily on for ever, or might fade and die; but it could never know a second blossoming.

"She's going to be my wife, Jeff," he repeated, as if to say these words was in itself to taste an overpowering happiness.

But William Jeffson seemed very stupid to-night. His conversational powers appeared to have undergone a kind of paralysis. He spoke slowly, and made long pauses every now and then.

"You're going to marry her, Master Jarge?" he said.

"Yes, Jeff. I love her better than any living creature in this world—better than the world itself, or my own life; for I think, if she had answered me differently to-day, I should have died. Why, you're not surprised, are you, Jeff? I thought you guessed at the very first—before I knew it myself, even—that I was in love with Isabel. Isabel! Isabel! what a pretty name! It sounds like a flower, doesn't it?"

"No; I'm not surprised, Master Jarge," the Yorkshireman said thoughtfully. "I knew you was in love with Miss Sleaford, regular fond about her, you know; but I didn't think—I didn't think—as you'd ask her to marry you so soon."

"But why not, Jeff?" cried the young man. "What should I wait for? I couldn't love her better than I do if I knew her for years and years, and every year were to make her brighter and lovelier than she is now. I've got a home to bring her to, and I'll work for her—I'll work for

her as no man ever worked before to make a happy home for his wife."

He struck out his arm, with his fist clenched, as if he thought that the highest round on the ladder of fortune was to be reached by any young surgeon who had the desire to climb.

"Why shouldn't I marry at once, Jeff?" he demanded, with some touch of indignation. "I can give my wife as good a home as that from which I shall take her."

"It isn't that as I was thinkin' of, Master Jarge," William Jeffson answered, growing slower of speech and graver of tone with every word he spoke; "it isn't that. But, you see, you know so little of Miss Sleaford; you know naught but that she's different, somehow, to all the other lasses you've seen, and that she seems to take your fancy like, because of that. You know naught about her, Master Jarge; and what's still worse—ever so much worse than that—you don't know that she loves you. You don't know that, Master Jarge. If you was only sure of *that*, the rest wouldn't matter so much; for there's scarcely

any thing in this world as true love can't do; and a woman that loves truly can't be aught but a good woman at heart. I see Miss Sleaford when you was standin' talkin' by the Seven Stars, Master Jarge, and there wasn't any look in her face as if she knew what you was sayin', or thought about it; but her eyes looked ever so far away like: and though there was a kind of light in her face, it didn't seem as if it had any thing to do with you. And, lor bless your heart, Master Jarge, you should have seen my Tilly's face when she come up the airey-steps in the square where she was head-housemaid, and see me come up to London on purpose to surprise her. Why, it was all of a shine like with smiles and brightness, at the sight o' *me*, Master Jarge; and I'm sure *I'm* no great shakes to look at," added Mr. Jeffson, in a deprecating tone.

The reins, lying loose upon Brown Molly's neck, shook with the sudden trembling of the hand that held them. George Gilbert was seized with a kind of panic as he listened to his Mentor's discourse. He had not presumed to solicit any

confession of love from Isabel Sleaford; he had thought himself more than blest, inasmuch as she had promised to become his wife; yet he was absolutely terror-stricken at Mr. Jeffson's humiliating suggestion, and was withal very angry at his old playmate's insolence.

"You mean that she doesn't love me?" he said sharply.

"Oh, Master Jarge, to be right down truthful with you, that's just what I do mean. She *doan't* love you; as sure as I've seen true love lookin' out o' my Tilly's face, I see somethin' that wasn't love lookin' out o' hearn to-night. I see just such a look in Miss Sleaford's eyes as I see once in a pretty young creetur that married a mate o' mine down home; a young man as had got a little bit o' land and cottage and every thing comfortable, and it wasn't the young creetur herself that was in favour o' marryin' him; but it was her friends that worried and bothered her till she said yes. She was a poor foolish young thing, that didn't seem to have the strength to say no. And I was at Joe Tillet's weddin',—his name was Joe Tillet,—and I

see the pretty young creetur standin', like as I saw Miss Sleaford to-night, close alongside her husband while he was talkin', and lookin' prettier nor ever in her straw-bonnet and white ribbons; but her eyes seemed to fix themselves on somethin' far away like; and when her husband turned of a sudden and spoke to her, she started, like as if she was waked out of a dream. I never forgot that look o' hearn, Master Jarge; and I saw the same kind o' look to-night."

"What nonsense you're talking, Jeff!" George answered, with considerable impatience. "I daresay your friend and his wife were very happy?"

"No, Master Jarge, they wasn't. And that's just the very thing that makes me remember the pretty young creetur's look that summer's day, as she stood, dressed out in her wedding-clothes, by her loving husband's side. He was very fond of her, and for a good two year or so he seemed very happy, and was allus tellin' his friends he'd got the best wife in the three Ridin's, and the quietest and most industrious; but she seemed to pine like; and by and by there was a young soldier came

home that had been to the Indies, and that was her first cousin, and had lived neighbours with her family when she was a bit of a girl. I won't tell you the story, Master Jarge; for it isn't the pleasantest kind o' thing to tell, nor yet to hear; but the end of it was, my poor mate Joe was found one summer's morning—just such a day as that when he was married—hanging dead behind the door of one of his barns; and as for the poor wretched young creetur as had caused his death, nobody ever knew what came of her. And yet," concluded Mr. Jeffson, in a meditative tone, "I've heard that poor chap Joe tell me so confident that his wife would get to love him dearly by and by, because he loved her so true and dear."

George Gilbert made no answer to all this. He rode on slowly, with his head drooping. The Yorkshireman kept an anxious watch upon his master; he could not see the expression of the young man's face, but he could see by his attitude that the story of Joseph Tillet's misadventure had not been without a depressing influence upon him.

"Si'thee noo, Master Jarge," said William

Jeffson, laying his hand upon the surgeon's wrist, and speaking in a voice that was almost solemn, "marryin' a pretty girl seems no more than gatherin' a wild rose out of the hedge to some men, they do it so light and careless-like,—just because the flower looks pretty where it's growin'. I'd known my Tilly six year before I asked her to be my wife, Master Jarge; and it was only because she'd been true and faithful to me all that time, and because I'd never, look at her when I might, seen any thing but love in her face, that I ventured at last to say to mysen, 'William Jeffson, there's a lass that'll make thee a true wife.' Doan't be in a hurry, Master Jarge; doan't! Take the advice of a poor ignorant chap as has one great advantage over all your learnin', for he's lived double your time in the world. Doan't be in a hurry. If Miss Sleaford loves ye true to-night, she'll love ye ten times truer this night twelvemonths, and truer still this time ten years. If she *doan't* love you, Master Jarge, keep clear of her as you would of a venomous serpent; for she'll bring you worse harm than ever that could do, if it stung you to the heart, and

made an end of you at once. I see Joe Tillet lyin' dead after the inquest that was held upon him, Master Jarge; and the thought that the poor desperate creetur had killed hisself warn't so bad to me as the sight of the suffering on his poor dead face,—the suffering that he'd borne nigh upon two year, Master Jarge, *and had held his tongue about.*"

CHAPTER IX.

MISS SLEAFORD'S ENGAGEMENT.

ISABEL SLEAFORD was "engaged." She remembered this when she woke on the morning after that pleasant day in Hurstonleigh grove, and that henceforward there existed a person who was bound to be miserable because of her. She thought this as she stood before the modest looking-glass, rolling the long plaits of hair into a great knot, that seemed too heavy for her head. Her life was all settled. She was not to be a great poetess or an actress. The tragic mantle of the Siddons might have descended on her young shoulders, but she was never to display its gloomy folds on any mortal stage. She was not to be any thing great. She was only to be a country surgeon's wife.

It was very commonplace, perhaps; and yet this lonely girl — this untaught and unfriended

creature—felt some little pride in her new position. After all, she had read many novels in which the story was very little more than this,—three volumes of simple love-making, and a quiet wedding at the end of the chapter. She was not to be an Edith Dombey or a Jane Eyre. Oh, to have been Jane Eyre, and to roam away on the cold moorland and starve,—wouldn't *that* have been delicious!

No, there was to be a very moderate portion of romance in her life; but still some romance. George Gilbert would be very devoted, and would worship her always, of course. She gave her head a little toss as she thought that, at the worst, she could treat him as Edith treated Dombey, and enjoy herself that way; though she was doubtful how far Edith Dombey's style of treatment might answer without the ruby velvet, and diamond coronet, and other "properties" appertaining to the *rôle*.

In the mean while Miss Sleaford performed her duties as best she could, and instructed the orphans in a dreamy kind of way, breaking off

in the middle of the preter-perfect tense of a verb to promise them that they should come to spend a day with her when she was married, and neglecting their fingering of the overture to *Masaniello* while she pondered on the colour of her wedding-dress.

And how much did she think of George Gilbert all this time? About as much as she would have thought of the pages who were to support the splendid burden of her trailing robes, if she had been about to be crowned Queen of England. He was the bridegroom, the husband; a secondary character in the play of which she was the heroine.

Poor George's first love-letter came to her on the following day,—a vague and rambling epistle, full of shadowy doubts and fears; haunted, as it were, by the phantom of poor dead-and-gone Joe Tillet, and without any punctuation whatever:

"But oh dearest ever dearest Isabel for ever dear you will be to me if you cast me from you and I should go to America for life in Gray-

bridge would be worse than odious without you Oh Isabel if you do not love me I implore you for pity sake say so and end my misery I know I am not worthy of your love who are so beautiful and accomplished but oh the thought of giving you up is so bitter unless you yourself should wish it and oh there is no sacrifice on earth I would not make for you."

The letter was certainly not as elegant a composition as Isabel would have desired it to be; but then a love-letter is a love-letter, and this was the first Miss Sleaford had ever received. George's tone of mingled doubt and supplication was by no means displeasing to her. It was only right that he should be miserable: it was only proper that he should be tormented by all manner of apprehensions. They would have to quarrel by and by, and to bid each other an eternal farewell, and to burn each other's letters, and be reconciled again. The quietest story could not be made out without such legitimate incidents in the course of the three volumes.

Although Isabel amused herself by planning her wedding-dress, and changed her mind very often as to the colour and material, she had no idea of a speedy marriage. Were there not three volumes of courtship to be gone through first?

Sigismund went back to town after the picnic which had been planned for his gratification, and Isabel was left quite alone with her pupils. She walked with them, and took her meals with them, and was with them all day; and it was only on a Sunday that she saw much of Mr. Raymond.

That gentleman was very kind to the affianced lovers. George Gilbert rode over to Conventford every alternate Sunday, and dined with the family at Oakbank. Sometimes he went early enough to attend Isabel and the orphans to church. Mr. Raymond himself was not a churchgoer, but he sent his grand-nieces to perform their devotions, as he sent them to have their hair clipped by the hairdresser, or their teeth examined by the dentist. George plunged into

the wildest extravagance in the way of waistcoats, in order to do honour to these happy Sundays; and left off mourning for his father a month or so earlier than he had intended, in order to infuse variety into his costume. Every thing he wore used to look new on these Sundays; and Isabel, sitting opposite to him in the square pew, would contemplate him thoughtfully when the sermon was dull, and wonder, rather regretfully, why his garments never wore themselves into folds, but always retained a hard angular look, as if they had been originally worn by a wooden figure, and had never got over that disadvantage. He wore a watch-chain that his father had given him,—a long chain that went round his neck, but which he artfully twisted and doubled into the semblance of a short one; and on this chain he hung a lucky sixpence and an old-fashioned silver vinaigrette; which trifles, when seen from a distance, looked almost like the gold charms which the officers stationed at Conventford wore dangling on their waistcoats.

And so the engagement dawdled on through all the bright summer months; and while the leaves were falling in the woods of Midlandshire, George still entreating that the marriage might speedily take place, and Isabel always deferring that ceremonial to some indefinite period.

Every alternate Sunday the young man's horse appeared at Mr. Raymond's gate. He would have come every Sunday, if he had dared, and indeed had been invited to do so by Isabel's kind employer; but he had sensitive scruples about eating so much beef and mutton, and drinking so many cups of tea, for which he could make no adequate return to his hospitable entertainer. Sometimes he brought a present for one of the orphans,—a workbox or a desk, fitted with scissors that wouldn't cut, and inkstands that wouldn't open (for there are no Parkins and Gotto in Graybridge or its vicinity), or a marvellous cake, made by Matilda Jeffson. Once he got up a little entertainment for his betrothed and her friends, and gave quite a dinner, with five sweets, and an elaborate dessert,

and with the most plum-coloured of ports, and the brownest of sherries, procured specially from the Cock at Graybridge. But as the orphans, who alone did full justice to the entertainment, were afflicted with a bilious attack on the following day, the experiment was not repeated.

But the dinner at Graybridge was not without its good effect. Isabel saw the house that was to be her home; and the future began to take a more palpable shape than it had worn hitherto. She looked at the little china ornaments on the mantelpiece, the jar of withered rose-leaves, mingled with faint odours of spices—the scent was very faint now, for the hands of George's dead mother had gathered the flowers. George took Isabel through the little rooms, and showed her an old-fashioned work-table, with a rosewood box at the top, and a well of fluted silk, that had once been rose-coloured, underneath.

"My mother used to sit at this table working, while she waited for my father; I've often heard him say so. You'll use the old workbox, won't you, Izzie?" George asked tenderly.

He had grown accustomed to call her Izzie now, and was familiar with her, and confided in her, as in a betrothed wife, whom no possible chance could alienate from him. He had ceased to regard her as a superior being, whom it was a privilege to know and worship. He loved her as truly as he had ever loved her; but not being of a poetical or sentimental nature, the brief access of romantic feeling which he had experienced on first falling in love speedily wore itself out, and the young man grew to contemplate his approaching marriage with perfect equanimity. He even took upon himself to lecture Isabel, on sundry occasions, with regard to her love of novel-reading, her neglect of plain needlework, and her appalling ignorance on the subject of puddings. He turned over her leaves, and found her places in the hymn-book at church; he made her follow the progress of the Lessons, with the aid of a church-service printed in pale ink and a minute type; and he frowned at her sternly when he caught her eyes wandering to distant bonnets during the sermon. All the young man's old

notions of masculine superiority returned now that he was familiar with Miss Sleaford; but all this while he loved her as only a good man can love, and supplicated all manner of blessings for her every night when he said his prayers.

Isabel Sleaford improved very much in this matter-of-fact companionship, and in the exercise of her daily round of duty. She was no longer the sentimental young lady, whose best employment was to loll in a garden-chair reading novels, and who was wont to burst into sudden rhapsodies about George Gordon Lord Byron and Napoleon the First upon the very smallest provocation. She had tried George on both these subjects, and had found him entirely wanting in any special reverence for either of her pet heroes. Talking with him on autumn Sunday afternoons in the breezy meadows near Conventford, with the orphans loitering behind or straggling on before, Miss Sleaford had tested her lover's conversational powers to the utmost; but as she found that he neither knew nor wished to know any thing about Edith Dombey or Ernest Maltravers, and that he re-

garded the poems of Byron and Shelley as immoral and blasphemous compositions, whose very titles should be unknown to a well-conducted young woman, Isabel was fain to hold her tongue about all the bright reveries of her girlhood, and to talk to Mr. Gilbert about what he did understand.

He had read Cooper's novels, and a few of Lever's; and he had read Sir Walter Scott and Shakespeare, and was fully impressed with the idea that he could not over-estimate these latter writers: but when Isabel began to talk about Edgar Ravenswood and Lucy, with her face all lighted up with emotion, the young surgeon could only stare wonderingly at his betrothed.

Oh, if he had only been like Edgar Ravenswood! The poor, childish, dissatisfied heart was always wishing that he could be something different from what he was. Perhaps during all that engagement the girl never once saw her lover really as he was. She dressed him up in her own fancies, and deluded herself by imaginary resemblances between him and the heroes in her books. If he was abrupt and disagreeable in his manner

to her, he was Rochester; and she was Jane Eyre, tender and submissive. If he was cold, he was Dombey; and she feasted on her own pride, and scorned him, and made much of one of the orphans during an entire afternoon. If he was clumsy and stupid, he was Rawdon Crawley; and she patronised him, and laughed at him, and taunted him with little scraps of French with the Albany-Road accent, and played off all green-eyed Becky's prettiest airs upon him. But in spite of all this the young man's sober common-sense exercised a beneficial influence upon her; and by and by, when the three volumes of court-ship had been prolonged to the uttermost, and the last inevitable chapter was close at hand, she had grown to think affectionately of her promised hus-band, and was determined to be very good and obedient to him when she became his wife.

But for the pure and perfect love which makes marriage thrice holy,—the love which counts no sacrifice too great, no suffering too bitter,—the love which knows no change but death, and seems instinct with such divinity that death can be but

its apotheosis,—such love as this had no place in Isabel Sleaford's heart. Her books had given her some vague idea of this grand passion, and on comparing herself with Lucy Ashton and Zuleika, with Amy Robsart and Florence Dombey and Medora, she began to think that the poets and novelists were all in the wrong, and that there were no heroes or heroines upon this commonplace earth.

She thought this, and she was content to sacrifice the foolish dreams of her girlhood, which were doubtless as impossible as they were beautiful. She was content to think that her lot in life was fixed, and that she was to be the wife of a good man, and the mistress of an old-fashioned house in one of the dullest towns in England. The time had slipped so quietly away since that spring twilight on the bridge at Hurstonleigh, her engagement had been taken so much as a matter of course by every one about her, that no thought of withdrawal therefrom had ever entered into her mind. And then, again, why should she withdraw from the engagement? George loved her;

and there was no one else who loved her. There was no wandering Jamie to come home in the still gloaming and scare her with the sight of his sad reproachful face. If she was not George Gilbert's wife, she would be nothing—a nursery-governess for ever and ever, teaching stupid orphans, and earning five-and-twenty pounds a-year. When she thought of her desolate position, and of another subject which was most painful to her, she clung to George Gilbert, and was grateful to him, and fancied that she loved him.

The wedding-day came at last,—one bleak January morning, when Conventford wore its barest and ugliest aspect; and Mr. Raymond gave his nursery-governess away, after the fashion of that simple Protestant ceremonial, which is apt to seem tame and commonplace when compared with the solemn grandeur of a Roman-Catholic marriage. He had given her the dress she wore, and the orphans had clubbed their pocket-money to buy their preceptress a bonnet as a surprise, which was a failure, after the usual manner of artfully-planned surprises.

Isabel Sleaford pronounced the words that made her George Gilbert's wife; and if she spoke them somewhat lightly, it was because there had been no one to teach her their solemn import. There was no taint of falsehood in her heart, no thought of revolt or disobedience in her mind; and when she came out of the vestry, leaning on her young husband's arm, there was a smile of quiet contentment on her face.

"Joe Tillet's wife could never have smiled like that," thought George, as he looked at his bride.

The life that lay before Isabel was new; and, being little more than a child as yet, she thought that novelty must mean happiness. She was to have a house of her own, and servants, and an orchard and paddock, two horses, and a gig. She was to be called Mrs. Gilbert: was not her name so engraved upon the cards which George had ordered for her, in a morocco card-case, that smelt like new boots and was difficult to open, as well as on those wedding-cards which the surgeon had distributed among his friends?

George had ordered envelopes for these cards

with his wife's maiden name engraved inside; but, to his surprise, the girl had implored him, ever so piteously, to counter-order them.

"Oh, don't have my name upon the envelopes, George," she said; "don't send my name to your friends; don't ever tell them what I was called before you married me."

"But why not, Izzie?"

"Because I hate my name," she answered passionately. "I hate it; I hate it! I would have changed it if I could when—when—I first came here; but Sigismund wouldn't let me come to his uncle's house in a false name. I hate my name; I hate and detest it."

And then suddenly seeing wonderment and curiosity plainly expressed in her lover's face, the girl cried out that there was no meaning in what she had been saying, and that it was only her own romantic folly, and that he was to forgive her, and forget all about it.

"But am I to send your name, or not, Isabel?" George asked rather coolly. He did not relish these flights of fancy on the part of the

young lady he was training with a view to his own ideal of a wife. "You first say a thing, and then say you don't mean it. Am I to send the envelopes, or not?"

"No, no, George; don't send them, please; I really do dislike the name. Sleaford *is* such an ugly name, you know."

CHAPTER X.

A BAD BEGINNING.

Mr. Gilbert took his young wife to an hotel at Murlington for a week's honeymoon—to a family-hotel; a splendid mansion, Isabel thought, where there was a solemn church-like stillness all day long, only broken by the occasional tinkling of silver spoons in the distance, or the musical chime of fragile glasses carried hither and thither on salvers of electro-plate. Isabel had never stayed at an hotel before; and she felt a thrill of pleasure when she saw the glittering table, the wax-candles in silver branches, the sweeping crimson curtains drawn before the lofty windows, and that delightful waiter, whose manner was such a judicious combination of protecting benevolence and obsequious humility.

Mrs. George Gilbert drew a long breath as

she trifled with the shining damask napkin, so wondrously folded into a bishop's mitre, and saw herself reflected in the tall glass on the opposite side of the room. She wore her wedding-dress still; a sombre brown-silk dress, which had been chosen by George himself because of its homely merit of usefulness, rather than for any special beauty or elegance. Poor Isabel had struggled a little about the choice of that dress, for she had wanted to look like Florence Dombey, on her wedding-day; but she had given way. Her life had never been her own yet, and never was to be her own, she thought; for now that her stepmother had ceased to rule over her by force of those spasmodic outbreaks of violence by which sorely-tried matrons govern their households, here was George, with his strong will and sound common-sense,—oh, how Isabel hated common-sense! —and she must needs acknowledge him as her master.

But she looked at her reflection in the glass, and saw that she was pretty. Was it only prettiness, or was it something more, even in spite

of the brown dress? She saw her pale face and black hair lighted up by the wax-candles; and thought, if this could go on for ever,—the tinkling silver and glittering glass, the deferential waiter, the flavour of luxury and elegance, not to say Edith Dombeyism, that pervaded the atmosphere,—she would be pleased with her new lot. Unhappily there was only to be a brief interval of this aristocratic existence, for George had told his young wife confidentially that he didn't mean to go beyond a ten-pound note; and by and by, when the dinner-table had been cleared, he amused himself by making abstruse calculations as to how long that sum would hold out against the charges of the family-hotel.

The young couple stayed for a week at Murlington. They drove about the neighbourhood in an open fly, conscientiously admiring what the guide-books called the beauties of the vicinity; and the bleak winds of January tweaked their young noses as they faced the northern sky. George was happy—ah, how serenely happy!—in

that the woman he so dearly loved was his wife. The thought of any sorrow darkling in the distance now, now that the solemn vows had been spoken, never entered into his mind. He had thought of William Jeffson's warning sometimes, it is true, but only to smile in superb contempt of the simple creature's foolish talk. Isabel loved him; she smiled at him when he spoke to her, and was gentle and obedient to his advice: he was, perhaps, a shade too fond of advising her. She had given up novel-reading, and employed her leisure in the interesting pursuit of plain needlework. Her husband watched her complacently by the light of the wax-candles while she hemmed a cambric handkerchief, threading and unthreading her needle very often, and boggling a little when she turned the corners, and stopping now and then to yawn behind her pretty little pink fingers; but then she had been out in the open air nearly all day, and it was only natural that she should be sleepy.

Perhaps it might have been better for George Gilbert if he had not solicited Mr. Pawlkatt's

occasional attendance upon the parish-patients, and thus secured a week's holiday in honour of his young wife. Perhaps it would have been better if he had kept his ten-pound note in his pocket, and taken Isabel straight to the house which was henceforth to be her home. That week in the hotel at Murlington revealed one dreadful fact to these young people; a fact which the Sunday-afternoon walks at Conventford had only dimly foreshadowed. They had very little to say to each other. That dread discovery, which should bring despair whenever it comes, dawned upon Isabel, at least, all at once; and a chill sense of weariness and disappointment crept into her breast, and grew there, while she was yet ignorant of its cause.

They had very little to say to each other. Woe to the husband and wife who discover this! for though the woman is more lovely than all the houris in Mahomet's Paradise; though the man is nobler and more splendid than Mr. Tennyson's King Arthur; they are foredoomed to be weary of one another's presence, and to loathe the lonely

hour which brings them face to face, with no better resource than to stare blankly across the desolate hearth, and talk about the weather. Speech—the electric telegraph which unites the widest regions of thought and fancy—is useless for them, or can only convey polite inanities more wearisome than silence. Together day by day, they live as much apart as if an ocean rolled between them; united by a hundred bonds, they want the subtle link that would have made them one; and, at the best, are only two separate creatures chained together. Year after year they drag the chain, and are good to each other, and esteem each other, and are patient, and wonder why they are not happy. If the lady is of a sentimental turn of mind, and a reader of French novels, she settles herself comfortably, as a woman whose destiny is to be miserable and misunderstood, and, from the lonely heights amid which she dwells, looks down upon her husband with supremely contemptuous compassion; while he, looking up at her from the busy regions of this lower world, sees only a frivolous creature

who neglects her household and runs long milliner's bills.

Have they ever tried to understand each other? In all the long weary years, have they ever conscientiously endeavoured to assimilate the tastes that seem so opposite? Has the woman ever said to herself, "My husband works very hard, and comes home at night very weary from that abominable counting-house; and yet I expect that his face will light up with rapture when I talk to him about the last novel that has been sent from Mudie's, the Beethoven quartette that I heard at the morning concert. Wouldn't it be more interesting to him if I asked whether Crashem and Smashem—that shaky firm, whose paper he has unwisely trusted in—have taken up the last bill of exchange? I don't care about Crashem and Smashem, and I have a very vague notion of the nature and properties of a bill of exchange; but then the subject is a matter of life and death to the poor hard-working creature sitting opposite to me at the long dinner-table; and it will be better for him to open his

heart, and discourse at his ease upon the flatness of things in the City, the scarcity of money, and the high rate of discount, than that he should sit patiently, sighing mournfully now and then, while I discourse about the last volume of the novel, or the delicious *arpeggio* movement in the quartette."

There is no trade so vulgar or commonplace, no study so recondite, no science so difficult, in which a tolerably clever woman cannot interest herself, if she seeks and wishes to be interested. She learns very little, perhaps,—only a kind of smattering; but she learns enough, if she learns to listen intelligently when her husband talks to her, to hazard a judicious question that may lead him a little farther on that pleasant road which he travels when he rides his own hobby-horse.

Isabel was very young. She had not yet parted with one of her delusions, and she ignorantly believed that she could keep those foolish dreams, and yet be a good wife to George Gilbert. He talked to her of his school-days; but she was not interested in those boyish records of

stand-up fights with bigger boys. (When ever was the hero of a fight the big boy? I wonder what becomes of all those defeated big boys in after life? Do they vanish away into empty space, when once they pass beyond the scholastic portals? or how is it that they are never heard of, and that every grown-up light-weight has been victor over a craven heavy-weight?)

George Gilbert related many such experiences to his young wife, and then branched away to his youth, his father's decline and death, his own election to the parish duties, his lonely bachelorhood, his hope of a better position and larger income some day. Oh, how dull and prosaic it all sounded to that creature, whose vague fancies were for ever wandering towards wonderful regions of poetry and romance! It was a relief to her when George left off talking, and left her free to think her own thoughts, as she laboured on at the cambric handkerchief, and pricked the points of her fingers, and entangled her thread.

There were no books in the sitting-room at the family-hotel; and even if there had been,

this honeymoon week seemed to Isabel a ceremonial period. She felt as if she were on a visit, and was not free to read. She sighed as she passed the library on the fashionable parade, and saw the names of the new novels exhibited on a board before the door; but she had not the courage to say how happy three cloth-covered volumes of light literature would have made her. George was not a reading man. He read the local papers and skimmed the *Times* after breakfast; and then, there he was, all day long. There were two wet days during that week at Murlington; and the young married people had ample opportunity of testing each other's conversational powers, as they stood in the broad window, watching occasional passers-by in the sloppy streets, and counting the rain-drops on the glass.

The week came to an end at last; and on a wet Saturday afternoon George Gilbert paid his bill at the family-hotel. The ten-pound note had held out very well; for the young bridegroom's ideas had never soared beyond a daily pint of sherry to wash down the simple repast which

the discreet waiter provided for those humble guests in pitiful regard of their youth and simplicity. Mr. Gilbert paid his bill, while Isabel packed her own and her husband's things; oh, what uninteresting things!—double-soled boots, and serviceable garments of gray woollen stuff. Then, when all was ready, she stood in the window watching for the omnibus which was to carry her to her new home. Murlington was only ten miles from Graybridge, and the journey between the two places was performed in an old-fashioned stunted omnibus,—a darksome vehicle, with a low roof, a narrow door, and only one small square of glass on each side.

Isabel breathed a long sigh as she watched for the appearance of this vehicle in the empty street. The dull wet day, the lonely pavement, the blank empty houses to let furnished—for it was not the Murlington season now—were not so dull or empty as her own life seemed to her this afternoon. Was it to be for ever and for ever like this? Yes; she was married, and the story was all over; her destiny was irrevocably

sealed, and she was tired of it already. But then she thought of her new home, and all the little plans she had made for herself before her marriage,—the alterations and improvements she had sketched out for the beautification of her husband's house. Somehow or other, even these ideas, which had beguiled her so in her maiden reveries, seemed to melt and vanish now. She had spoken to George, and he had received her suggestions doubtfully, hinting at the money which would be required for the carrying-out of her plans,—they were very simple plans too, and did not involve much expense.

Was there to be nothing in her life, then? She was only a week married; and already, as she stood at the window listening to the slop-slop of the everlasting rain, she began to think that she had made a mistake.

The omnibus came to the door presently, and she was handed into it, and her husband seated himself, in the dim obscurity, by her side. There was only one passenger—a wet farmer, wrapped in so many greatcoats that being wet

outside didn't matter to him, as he only gave other people cold. He wiped his muddy boots on Isabel's dress, the brown-silk wedding-dress which she had worn all the week; and Mrs. Gilbert made no effort to save the garment from his depredations. She leaned her head back in the corner of the omnibus, while the luggage was being bumped upon the roof above her, and let down her veil. The slow tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled down her pale cheeks.

It was a mistake,—a horrible and irreparable mistake,—whose dismal consequences she must bear for ever and ever. She felt no dislike of George Gilbert. She neither liked nor disliked him—only he could not give her the kind of life she wanted; and by her marriage with him she was shut out for ever from the hope of such a life. No prince would ever come now; no accidental duke would fall in love with her black eyes, and lift her all at once to the bright regions she pined to inhabit. No; it was all over. She had sold her birthright for a vulgar mess of pottage. She had bartered all the chances of the

future for a little relief to the monotony of the present,—for a few wedding-clothes, a card-case with a new name on the cards contained in it, the brief distinction of being a bride.

George spoke to her two or three times during the journey to Graybridge; but she only answered him in monosyllables. She had a "headache," she said,—that convenient feminine complaint which is an excuse for any thing. She never once looked out of the window, though the road was new to her. She sat back in the dusky vehicle, while George and the farmer talked local politics; and their talk mingled vaguely with her own misery. The darkness grew thicker in the low-roofed carriage; the voices of George and the farmer died drowsily away; and by and by there was snoring, whether from George or the farmer Isabel did not care to think. She was thinking of Byron and of Napoleon the First. Ah, to have lived in his time, and followed him, and slaved for him, and died for him in that lonely island far out in the waste of waters! The tears fell faster as all her childish dreams came back upon her, and

arrayed themselves in cruel contrast with her new life. Mr. Buckstone's bright Irish heroine, when she has been singing her song in the cold city street,—the song which she has dreamt will be the means of finding her lost nursling, —sinks down at last upon a snow-covered door-step, and sobs aloud because "it all seems so *real!*"

Life seemed "so real" now to Isabel. She awakened suddenly to the knowledge that all her dreams were only dreams after all, and never had been likely to come true. As it was, they could never come true; she had set a barrier against the fulfilment of those bright visions, and she must abide by her own act.

It was quite dark upon that wintry afternoon when the omnibus stopped at the Cock at Gray-bridge; and then there was more bumping about of the luggage, before Isabel was handed out upon the pavement to walk home with her husband. Yes; they were to walk home. What was the use of a ten-pound note spent upon splendour in Murlington, when the honeymoon was to close in

degradation such as this? They walked home. The streets were sloppy, and there was mud in the lane where George's house stood; but it was only five or ten minutes' walk, as he said, and nobody in Graybridge would have dreamed of hiring a fly.

So they walked home, with the luggage following on a truck; and when they came to the house, there was only a dim glimmer in the red lamp over the surgery-door. All the rest was dark; for George's letter to Mr. Jeffson had been posted too late, and the bride and bridegroom were not expected. Every body knows the cruel bleakness which that simple fact involves. There were no fires in the rooms; no cheery show of preparation; and there was a faint odour of soft-soap suggestive of recent cleaning. Mrs. Jeffson was up to her elbows in a flour-tub when the young master pulled his own door-bell; and she came out, with her arms white and her face dirty, to receive the newly-married pair. She set a flaring tallow-candle on the parlour-table, and knelt down to light the fire, exclaiming and won-

dering all the while at the unexpected arrival of Mr. Gilbert and his wife.

"My master's gone over to Conventford for some groceries, and we're all of a moodle like, ma'am," she said; "but we moost e'en do th' best we can, and make all coomfortable. Master Jarge said Moonday as plain as words could speak when he went away, and th' letter's not coom yet; so you must joost excuse things not bein' straight."

Mrs. Jeffson might have gone on apologising for some time longer; but she jumped up suddenly to attend upon Isabel, who had burst into a passion of hysterical sobbing. She was romantic, sensitive, impressionable—selfish, if you will; and her poor untutored heart revolted against the utter ruin of her dreams.

"It is *so* miserable!" she sobbed; "it all seems so miserable!"

George came in from the stables, where he had been to see Brown Molly, and brought his wife some sal-volatile, in a wine-glass of water; and Mrs. Jeffson comforted the poor young crea-

ture, and took her up to the half-prepared bedroom, where the carpets were still up, and where the white-washed walls—it was an old-fashioned house, and the upper rooms had never been papered—and the bare boards looked cheerless and desolate in the light of a tallow-candle. Mrs. Jeffson brought her young mistress a cup of tea, and sat down by the bedside while she drank it, and talked to her and comforted her, though she did not entertain a very high opinion of a young lady who went into hysterics because there was no fire in her sitting-room.

"I daresay it *did* seem cold and lonesome and comfortless like," Mrs. Jeffson said indulgently; "but we'll get things nice in no time."

Isabel shook her head.

"You are very kind," she said; "but it wasn't that made me cry."

She closed her eyes, not because she was sleepy, but because she wanted Mrs. Jeffson to go away and leave her alone. Then, when the good woman had retired with cautious footsteps, and closed the door, Mrs. George Gilbert slowly

opened her eyes, and looked at the things on which they were to open every morning for all her life to come.

There was nothing beautiful in the room, certainly. There was a narrow mantelpiece, with a few blocks of Derbyshire spar and other mineral productions; and above them there hung an old-fashioned engraving of some scriptural subject, in a wooden frame painted black. There was a lumbering old wardrobe—or press, as it was called—of painted wood, with a good deal of the paint chipped off; there was a painted dressing-table, a square looking-glass, with brass ornamentation about the stand and frame,—a glass in which George Gilbert's grandfather had looked at himself seventy years before. Isabel stared at the blank white walls, the gaunt shadows of the awkward furniture, with a horrible fascination. It was all so ugly, she thought; and her mind revolted against her husband, as she remembered that he could have changed all this, and yet had left it in its bald hideousness.

And all this time George was busy in his sur-

gery, grinding his pestle in so cheerful a spirit that it seemed to fall into a kind of tune, and thinking how happy he was now that Isabel Sleaford was his wife.

CHAPTER XI.

"SHE ONLY SAID, 'MY LIFE IS WEARY!'"

WHEN the chill discomfort of that first evening at Graybridge was past and done with, Isabel felt a kind of remorseful regret for the mute passion of discontent and disappointment that had gone along with it. The keen sense of misery passed with the bad influence of the day and hour. In the sunlight her new home looked a little better, her new life seemed a little brighter. Yes, she would do her duty, she would be a good wife to dear George, who was so kind to her, and loved her with such a generous devotion.

She went to church with him at Graybridge for the first time on the morning after that dreary wet Saturday evening; and all through the sermon she thought of her new home, and what she should do to make it bright and pretty. The

Rector of Graybridge had chosen one of the obscurest texts in St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews for his sermon that morning, and Isabel did not even try to understand him. She let her thoughts ramble away to carpets and curtains, and china flower-pots and Venetian blinds, and little bits of ornamentation, which should transform George's house from its square nakedness into a bowery cottage. Oh, if the trees had only grown differently! if there had been trailing parasites climbing up to the chimneys, and a sloping lawn, and a belt of laurels, and little winding pathways, and a rustic seat half-hidden under a weeping willow, instead of that bleak flat of cabbages and gooseberry-bushes, and raw clods of earth piled in black ridges across the dreary waste!

After church there was an early dinner of some baked meat, prepared by Mrs. Jeffson. Isabel did not take much notice of what she ate. She was at that early period of life when a young person of sentimental temperament scarcely knows roast beef from boiled veal: but she observed that there were steel forks on the surgeon's table,—

steel forks with knobby horn-handles suggestive of the wildest species of deer,—and a metal mustard-pot lined with blue glass, and willow-pattern plates, and a brown earthenware jug of home-brewed beer; and that every thing was altogether commonplace and vulgar.

After dinner Mrs. Gilbert amused herself by going over the house with her husband. It was a very tolerable house, after all; but it wasn't pretty; it had been inhabited by people who were fully satisfied so long as they had chairs to sit upon, and beds to sleep on, and tables and cups and plates for the common purposes of breakfast, dinner, and supper; and who would have regarded the purchase of a chair that was not intended to be sat upon, or a cup that was never designed to be drunk out of, as something useless and absurd, or even, in an indirect manner, sinful, because involving the waste of money that might be devoted to a better use.

"George," said Isabel, gently, when she had seen all the rooms, "did you never think of refurnishing the house?"

"Re-furnishing it! How do you mean, Izzie?"

"Buying new furniture, I mean, dear. This is all so old-fashioned."

George the conservative shook his head.

"I like it all the better for that, Izzie," he said; "it was my father's, you know, and his father's before him. I wouldn't change a stick of it for the world. Besides, it's such capital substantial furniture; they don't make such chairs and tables nowadays."

"No," Izzie murmured with a sigh; "I'm very glad they don't."

Then she clasped her hands suddenly upon his arm, and looked up at him with her eyes opened to their widest extent and shining with a look of rapture.

"O George," she cried, "there was an ottoman in one of the shops at Conventford with seats for three people, and little stands for people to put their cups and saucers upon, and a place in the middle for FLOWERS! And I asked the price of it,—I often ask the price of things, for it's almost

like buying them, you know,—and it was only eleven pounds ten, and I daresay they'd take less; and oh, George, if you'd make the best parlour into a drawing-room, and have that ottoman in the centre, and chintz-curtains lined with rose-colour, and a white watered paper on the walls, and Venetian shutters outside—"

George put his hand upon the pretty mouth from which the eager words came so rapidly.

"Why, Izzie," he said, "you'd ruin me before the year was out. All that finery would make a hole in a hundred pounds. No, no, dear; the best parlour was good enough for my father and mother, and it ought to be good enough for you and me. By and by, when my practice extends, Izzie, as I've every reason to hope it will, we'll talk about a new Kidderminster carpet,—a nice serviceable brown ground with a drab spot, or something of that kind,—but until then—"

Isabel turned away from him with a gesture of disgust.

"What do I care about new carpets?" she said; "I wanted it all to look pretty."

Yes: she wanted it to look pretty; she wanted to infuse some beauty into her life, something which, in however remote a degree, should be akin to the things she read of in her books. Every thing that was beautiful gave her a thrill of happiness: every thing that was ugly gave her a shudder of pain; and she had not yet learned that life was never meant to be all happiness, and that the soul must struggle towards the upper light out of a region of pain and darkness and confusion, as the blossoming plant pushes its way to the sunshine from amongst dull clods of earth. She wanted to be happy, and enjoy herself in her own way. She was not content to wait till her allotted portion of joy came to her; and she mistook the power to appreciate and enjoy beautiful things for a kind of divine right to happiness and splendour.

To say that George Gilbert did not understand his wife is to say very little. Nobody, except perhaps Sigismund Smith, had ever yet understood Isabel. She did not express herself better than other girls of her age; sometimes she expressed

herself worse; for she wanted to say so much, and a hopeless confusion would arise every now and then out of that entanglement of eager thought and romantic rapture which filled her brain. In Miss Sleaford's own home people had been a great deal too much occupied with the ordinary bustle of life to trouble themselves about a young lady's romantic reveries. Mrs. Sleaford thought that she had said all that was to be said about Isabel when she had denounced her as a lazy selfish thing, who would loll on the grass and read novels if the house was blazing and all her family perishing in the flames. The boys looked upon their half-sister with all that supercilious mixture of pity and contempt with which all boys are apt to regard any fellow-creature who is so weak-minded as to be a girl.

Mr. Sleaford was very fond of his only daughter; but he loved her chiefly because she was pretty, and had eyes whose like he had never seen except in the face of that young broken-hearted wife so early lost to him.

Nobody had ever quite understood Isabel; and

least of all could George Gilbert understand the woman whom he had chosen for his wife. He loved her and admired her, and he was honestly anxious that she should be happy; but then he wanted her to be happy according to his ideas of happiness, and not her own. He wanted her to be delighted with stiff little tea-parties, at which the Misses Pawlkatt, and the Misses Burdock, and young Mrs. Henry Palmer, wife of Mr. Henry Palmer junior, solicitor, discoursed pleasantly of the newest patterns in crochet, and the last popular memoir of some departed Evangelical curate. Isabel did not take any interest in these things, and could not make herself happy with these people. Unluckily she allowed this to be seen; and, after a few tea-parties, the Graybridge aristocracy dropped away from her, only calling now and then, out of respect to George, who was heartily compassionated on account of his most mistaken selection of a wife.

So Isabel was left to herself, and little by little fell back into very much the same kind of life as that which she had led at Camberwell.

She had given up all thought of beautifying the house which was now her home. After that struggle about the ottoman, there had been many other struggles, in which Isabel had pleaded for smaller and less expensive improvements, only to be blighted by that hard common-sense with which Mr. George Gilbert was wont—on principle—to crush his wife's enthusiasm. He had married this girl because she was unlike other women; and now that she was his own property, he set himself conscientiously to work to smooth her into the most ordinary semblance of everyday womanhood, by means of that moral flat-iron called common-sense.

Of course he succeeded to admiration. Isabel abandoned all hope of making her new home pretty, or transforming George Gilbert into a Walter Gay. She had made a mistake, and she accepted the consequences of her mistake; and fell back upon the useless dreamy life she had led so long in her father's house.

The surgeon's duties occupied him all day long, and Isabel was left to herself. She had

none of the common distractions of a young matron. She had no servants to scold, no china to dust, no puddings or pies or soups or hashes to compound for her husband's dinner. Mrs. Jeffson did all that kind of work, and would have bitterly resented any interference from the "slip of a girl" whom Mr. Gilbert had chosen for his wife. Isabel did as she liked; and this meant reading novels all day long, or as long as she had a novel to read, and writing unfinished verses of a lacrymose nature on half-sheets of paper.

When the spring came, she went out—alone; for her husband was away among his patients, and had no time to accompany her. She went for long rambles in that lovely Elizabethan Midlandshire, and thought of the life that never was to be hers. She wandered alone in the country lanes where the hedgerows were budding; and sat alone, with her book on her lap, among the buttercups and daisies in the shady angle of a meadow, where the untrimmed hawthorns made a natural bower above her head. Stray pedestrians crossing the meadows near Graybridge often found the doctor's young

wife sitting under a big green parasol, with a little heap of gathered wild-flowers fading on the grass beside her, and with an open book upon her knees. Sometimes she went as far as Thurston's Crag, the Midlandshire seat of Lord Thurston; a dear old place, an island of medieval splendour amidst a sea of green pasture-land, where, under the very shadow of a noble mansion, there was a waterfall and a mill, and a miller's cottage that was difficult to believe in out of a picture. There was a wooden bridge across that noisiest of waterfalls, and a monster oak, whose spreading branches shadowed all the width of the water; and it was on a rough wooden bench under this dear old tree that Isabel loved best to sit.

The Graybridge people were not slow to remark upon Mrs. Gilbert's habits, and hinted that a young person who spent so much of her time in the perusal of works of fiction could scarcely be a model wife. Before George had been married three months, the ladies who had been familiar with him in his bachelorhood had begun to pity him, and had already mapped out for him such a career

of domestic wretchedness as rarely falls to the lot of afflicted man.

Mrs. Gilbert was *not* pretty. The Graybridge ladies settled that question at the very first tea-party from which George and his wife were absent. She was not pretty—when you looked into her. That was the point upon which the feminine critics laid great stress. At a distance, certainly, Mrs. Gilbert might look showy. The lady who hit upon the adjective "showy" was very much applauded by her friends. At a distance Isabel might be called showy; always provided you like eyes that are so large as only by a miracle to escape from being goggles, and lips that are so red as to be unpleasantly suggestive of scarlet-fever. But *look into* Mrs. Gilbert, and even this show of beauty vanished, and you only saw a sickly young person, with insignificant features and coarse black hair—so coarse and common in texture, that its abnormal length and thickness—of which Isabel was no doubt inordinately proud—were very little to boast of.

But while the Graybridge ladies criticised his

wife and prophesied for him all manner of dismal sufferings, George Gilbert, strange to say, was very happy. He had married the woman he loved, and no thought that he had loved unwisely or married hastily ever entered his mind. When he came home from a long day's work, he found a beautiful creature waiting to receive him—a lovely and lovable creature, who put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and smiled at him. It was not in his nature to see that the graceful little embrace, and the welcoming kiss, and the smile, were rather mechanical matters that came of themselves. He took his dinner, or his weak tea, or his supper, as the case might be, and stretched his long legs across the familiar hearthrug, and talked to his wife, and was happy. If she had an open book beside her plate, and if her eyes wandered to the page every now and then while he was talking to her, she had often told him that she could listen and read at the same time; and no doubt she could do so. What more than sweet smiles and gentle looks could the most exacting husband demand? And George Gilbert had plenty of these; for Isabel

was very grateful to him, because he never grumbled at her idleness and novel-reading, or worried and scolded as her stepmother had done. She was fond of him, as she would have been fond of a big elder brother, who let her have a good deal of her own way; and so long as he left her unassailed by his common-sense, she was happy, and tolerably satisfied with her life. Yes; she was satisfied with her life, which was the same every day, and with the dull old town, where no change ever came. She was satisfied as an opium-eater is satisfied with the common everyday world; which is only the frame that holds together all manner of splendid and ever-changing pictures. She was content with a life in which she had ample leisure to dream of a different existence.

Oh, how she thought of that other and brighter life! that life in which there was passion, and poetry, and beauty, and rapture, and despair! Here, among these meadows, and winding waters, and hedgerows, life was a long sleep: and one might as well be a brown-eyed cow, browsing from week's end to week's end in the same pas-

tures, as a beautiful woman with an eager yearning soul.

Mrs. Gilbert thought of London—that wonderful West-End, May-Fair London, which has no attribute in common with all the great metropolitan wilderness around and about it. She thought of that holy of holies, that inner sanctuary of life, in which all the women are beautiful and all the men are wicked, in which existence is a perpetual whirlpool of balls and dinner-parties and hothouse flowers and despair. She thought of that untasted life, and pictured it, and thrilled with the sense of its splendour and brightness, as she sat by the brawling waterfall, and heard the creaking wheel of the mill, and the splashing of the trailing weeds. She saw herself amongst the light and music of that other world; queen of a lamplit boudoir, where loose patches of ermine gleamed whitely upon carpets of velvet-pile; where, amid a confusion of glitter and colour, she might sit, nestling among the cushions of a low gilded chair—a kind of indoor Cleopatra's galley—and listen contemptuously (she always imagined herself contemptuous)

to the eloquent compliments of a wicked prince. And then the Row! She saw herself in the Row sometimes, upon an Arab—a black Arab—that would run away with her at the most fashionable time in the afternoon, and all-but kill her: and then she would rein him up as no mortal woman ever reined-in an Arab steed before, and would ride slowly back between two ranks of half-scared, half-admiring faces, with her hair hanging over her shoulders and her eyelashes drooping on her flushed cheeks. And then the wicked prince, goaded by an unvarying course of contemptuous treatment, would fall ill, and be at the point of death: and one night, when she was at a ball, with floating robes of cloud-like lace and diamonds glimmering in her hair, he would send for her—that wicked, handsome, adorable creature would send his valet to summon her to his deathbed, and she would see him there in the dim lamplight, pale and repentant, and romantic and delightful; and as she fell on her knees in all the splendour of her lace and diamonds, he would break a blood-vessel and die! And then she would go back to

the ball, and would be the gayest and most beautiful creature in all that whirlpool of elegance and beauty. Only, the next morning, when her attendants came to awaken her, they would find her—*dead!*

Amongst the books which Mrs. Gilbert most often carried to the bench by the waterfall was the identical volume which Charles Raymond had looked at in such a contemptuous spirit in Hurstonleigh Grove—the little thin volume of poems entitled *An Alien's Dreams*. Mr. Raymond had given his nursery-governess a parcel of light literature soon after her marriage, and this poor little book of verses was one of the volumes in the parcel; and as Isabel knew her Byron and her Shelley by heart, and could recite long melancholy rhapsodies from the works of either poet by the hour together, she fastened quite eagerly upon this little green-covered volume by a nameless writer.

The Alien's dreams seemed like her own fancies, somehow; for they belonged to that bright *other* world which she was never to see.

How familiar the Alien was with that delicious region; and how lightly *he* spoke of the hothouse flowers and diamonds, the ermine carpets and Arab steeds! She read the poems over and over again in the drowsy June weather, sitting in the shabby little common parlour when the afternoons were too hot for outdoor rambles, and getting up now and then to look at her profile in the glass over the mantelpiece, and to wonder whether she was like any of those gorgeous but hollow-hearted creatures upon whom the Alien showered such torrents of melodious abuse.

Who was the Alien? Isabel had asked Mr. Raymond that question, and had been a little crushed by the reply. The Alien was a Midlandshire squire, Mr. Raymond had told her; and the word 'squire' suggested nothing but a broad-shouldered, rosy-faced man, in a scarlet coat and topboots. Surely no squire could have written those half-heartbroken, half-cynical verses, those deliciously scornful elegies upon the hollowness of lovely woman and things in general! Isabel had her own image of the writer—her own ideal poet,

who rose in all his melancholy glory, and pushed the red-coated country squire out of her mind when she sat with the *Alien's Dreams* in her lap, or scribbled weak imitations of that gentleman's poetry upon the backs of old envelopes and other scraps of waste paper.

Sometimes, when George had eaten his supper, Isabel would do him the favour of reading aloud one of the most spasmodic of the Alien's dreams. But when the Alien was most melodiously cynical, and the girl's voice tremulous with sudden exaltation of feeling, her eyes, wandering by chance to where her husband sat, would catch him yawning behind his glass of ale, or reckoning a patient's account on the square tips of his fingers. On one occasion poor George was terribly perplexed to behold his wife suddenly drop her book upon her lap and burst into tears. He could imagine no reason for her weeping, and he sat aghast, staring at her for some moments before he could utter any word of consolation.

"You don't care for the poetry, George," she cried, with the sudden passion of a spoiled child.

"Oh, why do you let me read to you, if you don't care for the poetry?"

"But I do care for it, Izzie dear," Mr. Gilbert murmured soothingly,—"at least I like to hear you read, if it amuses *you*."

Isabel flung the "Alien" into the remotest corner of the little parlour, and turned from her husband as if he had stung her.

"You don't understand me," she said; "you don't understand me."

"No, my dear Isabel," returned Mr. Gilbert with dignity (for his common-sense reasserted itself after the first shock of surprise); "I certainly do *not* understand you when you give way to such temper as this without any visible cause."

He walked over to the corner of the room, picked up the little volume, and smoothed the crumpled leaves; for his habits were orderly, and the sight of a book lying open upon the carpet was unpleasant to him.

Of course poor George was right, and Isabel was a very capricious, ill-tempered young woman when she flew into a passion of rage and grief

because her husband counted his fingers while she was reading to him. But then such little things as these make the troubles of people who are spared from the storm and tempest of life. Such sorrows as these are the Scotch mists, the drizzling rains of existence. The weather doesn't appear so very bad to those who behold it from a window; but that sort of scarcely perceptible drizzle chills the hapless pedestrian to the very bone. I have heard of a lady who was an exquisite musician, and who, in the dusky twilight of a honeymoon evening, played to her husband, —played as some women play, pouring out all her soul upon the keys of the piano, breathing her finest and purest thoughts in some master-melodies of Beethoven or Mozart.

"That's a very *pretty tune*," said the husband complacently.

She was a proud reserved woman, and she closed the piano without a word of complaint or disdain; but she lived to be old, and she never touched the keys again.

CHAPTER XII.

SOMETHING LIKE A BIRTHDAY.

It happened that the very day after Isabel's little outbreak of passion was a peculiar occasion in George Gilbert's life. It was the 2d of July, and it was his wife's birthday,—the first birthday after her marriage; and the young surgeon had planned a grand treat and surprise, quite an elaborate festival, in honour of the day. He had been, therefore, especially wounded by Isabel's ill-temper. Had he not been thinking of her and of her pleasure at the very moment when she had upbraided him for his lack of interest in the Alien? He did *not* care about the Alien. He did not appreciate

> "Clotilde, Clotilde, my dark Clotilde!
> With the sleepy light in your midnight glance,
> We let the dancers go by to dance;
> But we stayed out on the lamplit stair,
> And the odorous breath of your trailing hair
> Swept over my face as your whispers stole
> Like a gush of melody through my soul;
> Clotilde, Clotilde, my own Clotilde!"

But he loved his wife, and was anxious to please her; and he had schemed and plotted to do her pleasure. He had hired a fly—an open fly—for the whole day, and Mrs. Jeffson had prepared a basket with port and sherry from the Cock, and all manner of north-country delicacies; and George had written to Mr. Raymond, asking that gentleman, with the orphans of course, to meet himself and his wife at Warncliffe Castle, the show-place of the county. This Mr. Raymond had promised to do; and all the arrangements had been carefully planned, and had been kept profoundly secret from Isabel.

She was very much pleased when her husband told her of the festival early on that bright summer morning, while she was plaiting her long black hair at the little glass before the open lattice. She ran to the wardrobe to see if she had a clean muslin dress. Yes, there it was; the very lavender-muslin which she had worn at the Hurstonleigh picnic. George was delighted to see her pleasure; and he sat on the window-sill watching her as she arranged her collar and fastened a little

bow of ribbon at her throat, and admired herself in the glass.

"I want it to be like that day last year, Izzie; the day I asked you to marry me. Mr. Raymond will bring the key of Hurstonleigh Grove, and we're to drive there after we've seen the castle, and picnic there as we did before; and then we're to go to the very identical model old woman's to tea; and every thing will be exactly the same."

Ah, Mr. George Gilbert, do you know the world so little as to be ignorant that no day in life ever has its counterpart, and that to endeavour to bring about an exact repetition of any given occasion is to attempt the impossible?

It was a six-mile drive from Graybridge to Warncliffe, the grave old county town,—the dear old town, with shady pavements, and abutting upper stories, pointed gables, and diamond-paned casements; the queer old town, with wonderful churches, and gloomy archways, and steep stony streets, and above all, the grand old castle, the black towers, and keep, and turrets, and gloomy basement dungeons, lashed for ever and for ever

by the blue rippling water. I have never seen Warncliffe Castle except in the summer sunshine, and my hand seems paralysed when I try to write of it. It is easy to invent a castle, and go into raptures about the ivied walls and mouldering turrets; but I shrink away before the grand reality, and can describe nothing; I see it all too plainly, and feel the tameness of my words too much. But in summer-time this Elizabethan Midlandshire is an English paradise, endowed with all the wealth of natural loveliness, enriched by the brightest associations of poetry and romance.

Mr. Raymond was waiting at the little doorway when the fly stopped, and he gave Isabel his arm and led her into a narrow winding alley of verdure and rockwork, and then across a smooth lawn, and under an arch of solid masonry to another lawn, a velvety grass-plat, surrounded by shrubberies, and altogether a triumph of landscape gardening.

They went into the castle with a little group of visitors who had just collected on the broad steps before the door; and they were taken at once under

the convoy of a dignified housekeeper in a rustling silk-gown, who started off into a *viva-voce* catalogue of the contents of the castle-hall, a noble chamber with armour-clad effigies of dead-and-gone warriors ranged along the walls, with notched battle-axes, and cloven helmets, and monster antlers, and Indian wampum, and Canadian wolf-skins, and Australian boomerangs hanging against the wainscot, with carved oak and ebony muniment-chests upon the floor, and with three deep-embayed windows overhanging the brightest landscape, the fairest streamlet in England.

While the housekeeper was running herself down like a musical box that had been newly wound up, and with as much animation and expression in her tones as there is in a popular melody interpreted by a musical box, Mr. Raymond led Isabel to the window, and showed her the blue waters of the Wayverne tumbling head foremost over craggy masses of rockwork, green boulders, and pebbles that shimmered in the sunlight, and then, playing hide-and-seek under dripping willows, and brawling away over eme-

rald moss and golden sand, to fall with a sudden impetus into the quiet depths beneath the bridge.

"Look at that, my dear," said Mr. Raymond; "that isn't in the catalogue. I'll tell you all about the castle: and we'll treat the lady in the silk-dress as they treat the organ-boys in London. We'll give her half-a-crown to move on, and leave us to look at the pictures, and the boomerangs, and the armour, and the tapestry, and the identical toilet-table and pincushion in which her gracious Majesty stuck the pin she took out of her bonnet-string when she took luncheon with Lord Warncliffe a year or two ago. That's the gem of the catalogue in the housekeeper's opinion, I know. We'll look at the pictures by ourselves, Mrs. Gilbert, and I'll tell you all about them."

To my mind Warncliffe Castle is one of the pleasantest show-places in the kingdom. There are not many rooms to see, nor are they large rooms. There are not many pictures; but the few in every room are of the choicest, and are hung on a level with the eye, and do not neces-

sitate that straining of the spinal column which makes the misery of most picture-galleries. Warncliffe Castle is like an elegant little dinner; there are not many dishes, and every thing is so good that you wish there were more. I have been at Hampton Court with people who give you forty minutes to *do* all the rooms, and I have done a Sunday-afternoon scamper over Versailles with a cicerone who, whenever my eyes rested on a picture, reminded me sharply that I had eighty more rooms to see before dinner. But at Warncliffe you lounge through a suite of sunny chambers that have the extra charm of looking as if people lived in them. You see not only Murillos and Titians, Lelys and Vandykes upon the walls; you see tables scattered with books, and women's handiwork here and there; and whichever way you turn, there is always the noisy Wayverne brawling and rippling under the windows, and the green expanse of meadow and the glory of purple woodland beyond.

Isabel moved through the rooms in a silent rapture; but yet there was a pang of anguish

lurking somewhere or other amid all that rapture.

Her dreams were all true, then; there were such places as this, and people lived in them. Happy people, for whom life was all loveliness and poetry, looked out of those windows, and lolled in those antique chairs, and had caskets of Florentine mosaic, and portraits by Vandyke, and marble busts of Roman emperors, and Gobelin tapestries, and a hundred objects of art and beauty, whose very names were a strange language to Isabel, surrounding them on every side *always*.

For some people life was like this; and for her—! She shuddered as she remembered the parlours at Graybridge,—the shabby carpet, the faded moreen curtains edged with rusty velvet, the cracked jars and vases on the mantelpiece; and even if George had given her all that she had asked—the ottoman, and the Venetian blind, and the rose-coloured curtains—what would have been the use? her room would never have looked like *this*. She gazed about her in a sort of walking

dream, intoxicated by the beauty of the place. She was looking like this when Mr. Raymond led her into one of the larger rooms, and showed her a little picture in a corner, a Tintoretto, which he said was a gem.

She looked at the Tintoretto in a drowsy kind of way. It was a very brown gem, and its beauties were quite beyond Mrs. Gilbert's appreciation. She was not thinking of the picture. She was thinking if, by some romantic legerdemain, she could "turn out" to be the rightful heiress of such a castle as this, with a river like the Wayverne brawling under her windows, and trailing willow-branches dipping into the water. There were some such childish thoughts as these in her mind while Mr. Raymond was enlarging upon the wonderful finish and modelling of the Venetian's masterpiece; and she was aroused from her reverie not by her companion's remarks, but by a woman's voice on the other side of the room.

"You so rarely see that contrast of fair hair and black eyes," said the voice; "and there is something peculiar in those eyes."

There was nothing particular in the words: it was the tone in which they were spoken that caught Isabel Gilbert's ear—the tone in which Edith Dombey or Lady Clara Vere de Vere might have spoken; a tone in which there was a lazy hauteur softened by womanly gentleness,—a drawling accent which had yet no affectation, only a kind of liquid carrying on of the voice, like a *legato* passage in music.

"Yes," returned another voice, which had all the laziness and none of the hauteur, "it is a pretty face. Joanna of Naples, isn't it? she was an improper person, wasn't she? threw some one out of a window, and made herself altogether objectionable."

Mr. Raymond wheeled round as suddenly as if he had received an electric shock, and ran across the room to a gentleman who was lounging in a half-reclining attitude upon one of the broad window-seats.

"Why, Roland, I thought you were at Corfu!"

The gentleman got up, with a kind of effort and the faintest suspicion of a yawn; but his face

brightened nevertheless, as he held out his hand to Isabel's late employer.

"My dear Raymond, how glad I am to see you! I meant to ride over to-morrow morning, for a long day's talk. I only came home last night, to please my uncle and cousin, who met me at Baden, and insisted on bringing me home with them. You know Gwendoline? ah, yes, of course you do."

A lady with fair banded hair and an aquiline nose—a lady in a bonnet which was simplicity itself, and could only have been produced by a milliner who had perfected herself in the supreme art of concealing her art—dropped the double eye-glass through which she had been looking at Joanna of Naples, and held out a hand so exquisitely gloved that it looked as if it had been sculptured out of gray marble.

"I'm afraid Mr. Raymond has forgotten me," she said; "papa and I have been so long away from Midlandshire."

"And Lowlands was beginning to look quite a deserted habitation. I used to think of Hood's

haunted house whenever I rode by your gates, Lady Gwendoline. But you have come home for good now? as if *you* could come for any thing *but* good," interjected Mr. Raymond gallantly. "You have come with the intention of stopping, I hope?"

"Yes," Lady Gwendoline answered, with something like a sigh; "papa and I mean to settle in Midlandshire; he has let the Clarges-Street house for a time; sold his lease, at least, I think; or something of that sort. And we know every nook and corner of the Continent. So I suppose that really the best thing we can do is to settle at Lowlands. But I suppose we sha'n't keep Roland long in the neighbourhood. He'll get tired of us in a fortnight, and run away to the Pyrenees, or Cairo, or Central Africa; 'any where, any where, out of the world!'"

"It isn't of *you* that I shall get tired, Gwendoline," said the gentleman called Roland, who had dropped back into his old lounging attitude on the window-seat. "It's myself that bores me; the only bore a man can't cut. But I'm not going to

run away from Midlandshire. I shall go in for steam-farming, and agricultural implements, and drainage. I should think drainage now would have a very elevating influence upon a man's mind; and I shall send my short-horns to Smithfield next Christmas. And you shall teach me political economy, Raymond; and we'll improve the condition of the farm-labourer; and we'll offer a prize for the best essay on, say, classical agriculture as revealed to us in the writings of Virgil—that's the sort of thing for the farm-labourer, I should think—and Gwendoline shall give the prizes: a blue ribbon and a gold medal, and a frieze coat, or a pair of top-boots."

Isabel still lingered by the Tintoretto. She was aghast at the fact that Mr. Raymond knew, and was even familiar with, these beings. Yes; Beings—creatures of that remote sphere which she only knew in her dreams. Standing near the Tintoretto, she ventured to look very timidly towards these radiant creatures.

What did she see? A young man half reclining in the deep embrasure of a window, with the

summer sunshine behind him, and the summer breezes fluttering his loose brown hair—that dark rich brown which is only a warmer kind of black. She saw a man upon whom beneficent or capricious nature, in some fantastic moment, had lavished all the gifts that men most covet and that women most admire. She saw one of the handsomest faces ever seen since Napoleon, the young conqueror of Italy, first dazzled regenerated France; a kind of face that is only familiar to us in a few old Italian portraits; a beautiful, dreamy, perfect face, exquisite alike in form and colour. I do not think that any words of mine can realise Roland Lansdell's appearance; I can only briefly catalogue the features, which were perfect in their way, and yet formed so small an item in the homogeneous charm of this young man's appearance. The nose was midway betwixt an aquiline and a Grecian, but it was in the chiselling of the nostril, the firmness and yet delicacy of the outline, that it differed from other noses; the forehead was neither high nor low, but broad, and full at the temples; the head was strong in the perceptive faculties, very

strong in benevolence, altogether wanting in destructiveness; but Mr. Raymond could have told you that veneration and conscientiousness were deficient in Roland Lansdell's cranium,—a deficiency sorely to be lamented by those who knew and loved the young man. His eyes and mouth formed the chief beauty of his face; and yet I can describe neither, for their chief charm lay in the fact that they were indescribable. The eyes were of a nondescript colour; the mouth was ever varying in expression. Sometimes you looked at the eyes, and they seemed to you a dark bluish-gray; sometimes they were hazel; sometimes you were half beguiled into fancying them black. And the mouth was somehow in harmony with the eyes; inasmuch as looking at it one minute you saw an expression of profound melancholy in the thin flexible lips; and then in the next a cynical smile. Very few people ever quite understood Mr. Lansdell, and perhaps this was his highest charm. When Lord Dundreary declares that he likes to wonder, he only gives utterance to a universal attribute of the mind. To be puzzled is the next

thing to being interested; to be interested is to be charmed. Yes, capricious Nature had showered her gifts upon Roland Lansdell. She had made him handsome, and had attuned his voice to a low melodious music, and had made him sufficiently clever; and, beyond all this, had bestowed upon him that subtle attribute of grace, which she and she alone can bestow. He was always graceful. Involuntarily and unconsciously he fell into harmonious attitudes. He could not throw himself into a chair, or rest his elbow upon a table, or lean against the angle of a doorway, or stretch himself full-length upon the grass to fall asleep with his head upon his folded arms, without making himself into a kind of picture. He looked like a picture just now as he lounged in the castle-window, with his face turned towards Mr. Raymond.

The lady, who was called Lady Gwendoline, put up her eyeglass to look at another picture; and in that attitude Isabel had time to contemplate her, and saw that she too was graceful, and that in every fold of her simple dress—it was only muslin, but quite a different fabric to Isabel's muslin—

there was an indescribable harmony which stamped her as the creature of that splendid sphere which the girl only knew in her books. She looked longer and more earnestly at Lady Gwendoline than at Roland Lansdell, for in this elegant being she saw the image of herself, as she had fancied herself so often—the image of a heartless aristocratic divinity, for whose sake people cut their throats, and broke blood-vessels, and drowned themselves.

George came in while his wife was looking at Lady Gwendoline, and Mr. Raymond suddenly remembered the young couple whom he had taken upon himself to chaperone.

"I must introduce you to some new friends of mine, Roland," he said; "and when you are ill you must send for Mr. Gilbert of Graybridge, who, I am given to understand, is a very clever surgeon, and whom I *know* to have the best moral region I ever had under my hand. Gilbert, my dear boy, this is Roland Lansdell of Mordred Priory; Lady Gwendoline, Mrs. Gilbert—Mr. Lansdell. But you know some-

thing about my friend Roland, I think, don't you, Isabel?"

Mrs. Gilbert bowed and smiled and blushed in a pleasant bewilderment. To be introduced to two Beings in this off-hand manner was almost too much for Mr. Sleaford's daughter. A faint perfume of jasmine and orange-blossom floated towards her from Lady Gwendoline's handkerchief, and she seemed to see the fair-haired lady who smiled at her, and the dark-haired gentleman who had risen at her approach, through an odorous mist that confused her senses.

"I think you know something of my friend Roland," Mr. Raymond repeated; "eh, my dear?"

"Oh, n—no indeed," Isabel stammered; "I never saw—"

"You never saw *him* before to-day," answered Mr. Raymond, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder with a kind of protecting tenderness in the gesture. "But you've read his verses; those pretty drawing-room Byronics, that refined and anglicised Alfred-de-Musset-ism, that you told me you are so fond of:—don't you remember ask-

ing me who wrote the verses, Mrs. Gilbert? I told you the Alien was a country squire; and here he is—a Midlandshire squire of high degree, as the old ballad has it."

Isabel's heart gave a great throb, and her pale face flushed all over with a faint carnation. To be introduced to a Being was something, but to be introduced to a Being who was also a poet, and the very poet whose rhapsodies were her last and favourite idolatry! She could not speak. She tried to say something—something very commonplace, to the effect that the verses were very pretty, and she liked them very much, thank you—but the words refused to come, and her lips only trembled. Before she could recover her confusion, Mr. Raymond had hooked his arm through that of Roland Lansdell, and the two men had walked off together, talking with considerable animation; for Charles Raymond was a kind of adopted father to the owner of Mordred Priory, and was about the only man that Roland had ever loved or trusted.

Isabel was left by the open window with Lady

Gwendoline and George, whose common-sense preserved him serene and fearless in the presence of these superior creatures.

"You like my cousin's poetry, then, Mrs. Gilbert?" said Lady Gwendoline.

Her cousin! The dark-haired being was cousin to this fair-haired being in the Parisian bonnet,—a white-chip bonnet, with just one feathery sprig of mountain heather, and broad thick white-silk strings tied under an aristocratic chin —a determined chin, Mr. Raymond would have told Isabel.

Mrs. Gilbert took heart of grace now that Roland Lansdell was out of hearing, and said, "Oh, yes; she was very, very fond of the *Alien's Dreams;* they were so sweetly pretty."

"Yes, they are pretty," Lady Gwendoline said, seating herself by the window, and playing with her bonnet-strings as she spoke; "they are very graceful. Do sit down, Mrs. Gilbert; these show-places are so fatiguing. I am waiting for papa, who is talking politics with some Midlandshire people in the hall. I am very glad you like

Roland's verses. They're not very original; all the young men write the same kind of poetry nowadays—a sort of mixture of Tennyson and Alfred de Musset. It reminds me of Balfe's music, somehow; it pleases, and one catches the melody without knowing how or why. The book made quite a little sensation. The *Westminster* was very complimentary, but the *Quarterly* was dreadful. I remember Roland reading the article and laughing at it; but he looked like a man who tries to be funny in tight boots; and he called it by some horrible slang term—'a slate,' I think he said."

Isabel had nothing to say to this. She had never heard that the *Quarterly* was a popular review; and, indeed, the adjective 'quarterly' had only one association for her, and that was rent, which had been almost as painful a subject as taxes in the Camberwell household. Lady Gwendoline's papa came in presently to look for his daughter. He was Angus Pierrepoint Aubrey Amyott Pomphrey, Earl of Ruysdale; but he wore a black coat and gray trousers and waistcoat, just

like other people, and had thick boots, and didn't look a bit like an earl, Isabel thought.

He said, "Haw, hum—yes, to be sure, my dear," when Lady Gwendoline told him that she was ready to go home; "been talking to Witherston—very good fellow, Witherston—wants to get his son returned for Conventford, gen'ral 'lection next year, lib'ral int'rest—very gentlemanly young f'ler, the son;" and then he went to look for Roland, whom he found in the next room with Charles Raymond; and then Lady Gwendoline wished Isabel good-morning, and said something very kind, to the effect that they should most likely meet again before long, Lowlands being so near Graybridge; and then the Earl offered his arm to his daughter.

She took it, but she looked back at her cousin, who was talking to Mr. Raymond, and glancing every now and then in a half-amused, half-admiring way at Isabel.

"I am so glad to think you like my wretched scribble, Mrs. Gilbert," he said, going up to her presently.

Isabel blushed again, and said, "Oh, thank you; yes, they are very pretty;" and it was as much as she could do to avoid calling Mr. Lansdell "Sir" or "Your lordship."

"You are coming with us, I suppose, Roland?" Lady Gwendoline said.

"Oh, yes,—that is to say, I'll see you to the carriage."

"I thought you were coming to luncheon."

"No; I meant to come, but I must see that fellow Percival, the lawyer, you know, Gwendoline, and I want to have a little more talk with Raymond. You'll go on and show Mrs. Gilbert the Murillo in the next room, Raymond? and I'll run and look for my cousin's carriage, and then come back."

"We can find the carriage very well without you, Roland," Lady Gwendoline answered quickly. "Come, papa."

The young man stopped, and a little shadow darkened over his face.

"Did you really ask me to luncheon?" he said.

"You really volunteered to come, after breakfast this morning, when you proposed bringing us here."

"Did I? Oh, very well; in that case I shall let the Percival business stand over; and I shall ride to Oakbank to-morrow morning, Raymond, and lie on the grass and talk to you all day long, if you'll let me waste your time for once in a way. Good-by; good-morning, Mrs. Gilbert. By the by, how do you mean to finish the day, Raymond?"

"I'm going to take Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert to Hurstonleigh Grove; or rather they take me, for they've brought a basket that reminds one of the Derby-day. We're going to picnic in the grove, and drink tea at a cottage in honour of Isabel's—Mrs. Gilbert's birthday."

"You must come and picnic at Mordred some day. It's not as pretty as Hurstonleigh, but we'll manage to find a rustic spot. If you care for partridges, Mr. Gilbert, you'll find plenty in the woods round Mordred next September."

The young man put on his hat, and went after

his cousin and her father. Isabel saw him walk along the bright vista of rooms, and disappear in a burst of sunshine that flooded the great hall when the door was opened. The beings were gone. For a brief interval she had been breathing the poetry of life; but she fell back now into the sober prose, and thought that half the grandeur of the castle was gone with those aristocratic visitors.

"And how do you like my young kinsman?" Mr. Raymond asked presently.

Isabel looked at him with surprise.

"He is your relation—Mr. Lansdell?"

"Yes. My mother was a Lansdell. There's a sort of cousinship between Roland and me. He's a good fellow—a very noble-hearted, high-minded young fellow; but—"

But what? Mr. Raymond broke off with so deep a sigh, that Isabel imagined an entire romance upon the strength of the inspiration. Had he done any thing wicked? that dark beautiful creature, who only wanted the soul-harrowing memory of a crime to render him perfect. Had

he fled his country, like Byron? or buried a fellow-creature in a cave, like Mr. Aram? Isabel's eyes opened to their widest extent; and Charles Raymond answered that inquiring glance.

"I sigh when I speak of Roland," he said, "because I know the young man is not happy. He stands quite alone in the world, and has more money than he knows how to spend; two very bad things for a young man. He's handsome and fascinating,—another disadvantage; and he's brilliant without being a genius. In short, he's just the sort of man to dawdle away the brightest years of his life in the drawing-rooms of a lot of women, and take to writing cynical trash about better men in his old age. I can see only one hope of redemption for him, and that is a happy marriage; a marriage with a sensible woman, who would get the whip-hand of him before he knew where he was. All the luckiest and happiest men have been henpecked. Look at the fate of the men who *won't* be henpecked. Look at Swift: he was a lord of the creation, and made the women mind him; look at him drivel-

ling and doting under the care of a servant-maid. Look at Sterne; and Steele, who would fain have been good and loyal, but who was tempted away from his allegiance; and Byron, who outraged his wife in fact, and satirised her in fiction. Was his life so much the better because he scorned the gentle guidance of the apron-string? Depend upon it, Mrs. Gilbert, the men who lead great lives, and do noble deeds, and die happy deaths, are married men who mind their wives. I'm a bachelor; so of course I speak without prejudice. I do most heartily wish that Roland Lansdell may marry a good and sensible woman."

"A good and sensible woman!"

Isabel gave an involuntary shudder. Surely, of all the creatures upon this over-populated earth, a sensible woman was the very last whom Roland Lansdell ought to marry. He should marry some lovely being in perpetual white muslin, with long shimmering golden hair,—the dark men always married fair women in Isabel's novels,—a creature who would sit at his feet, and watch with him, as Astarte watched with Manfred, till

dismal hours in the silent night; and who should be consumptive, and die some evening—promiscuously, as Mrs. Gamp would say—with flowers upon her breast, and a smile upon her face.

Isabel knew very little more of the pictures, or the men in armour, or the cannon in the chambers that yet remained to be seen at Warncliffe Castle. She was content to let Mr. Raymond and her husband talk. George admired the cannon, and the old-fashioned locks and keys, and the model of a cathedral made by a poor man out of old champagne-corks, and a few other curiosities of the same order; and he enjoyed himself, and was happy to see that his wife was pleased. He could tell that, by the smile upon her lips, though she said so little.

The drive from Warncliffe to Hurstonleigh Grove was as beautiful as the drive from Graybridge to Warncliffe; for this part of Midlandshire is a perpetual park. Isabel sat back in the carriage, and thought of Lady Gwendoline's aristocratic face and white-chip bonnet, and wondered whether she was the sensible woman whom

Roland Lansdell would marry. They would be a very handsome couple. Mrs. Gilbert could fancy them riding Arabs—nobody worth speaking of ever rode any thing but Arab horses, in Isabel's fancy—in Rotten Row. She could see Lady Gwendoline with a cavalier hat and a long sweeping feather, and Roland Lansdell bending over her horse's neck to talk to her, as they rode along. She fancied them in that glittering saloon, which was one of the stock scenes always ready to be pushed on the stage of her imagination. She fancied them in the midst of that brilliant supernumerary throng who wait upon the footsteps of heroes and heroines. She pictured them to herself going down to the grave through an existence of dinner-parties, and Rotten Row, and balls, and Ascot cups. Ah, what a happy life! what a glorious destiny!

The picnic seemed quite a tame thing after these reveries in the carriage. The orphans met their uncle at the lodge-gate; and they all went across the grass, just as they had gone before, to the little low iron-gate which Mr. Raymond was

privileged to open with a special key; and into the grove, where the wonderful beeches and oaks made a faint summer darkness.

Was it the same grove? To Isabel it looked as if it had been made smaller since that other picnic; and the waterfall, and the woodland vistas, and the winding paths, and the arbour where they were to dine,—it was all very well for the orphans to clap their hands, and disport themselves upon the grass, and dart off at a tangent every now and then to gather inconvenient wild-flowers; but, after all, there was nothing so very beautiful in Hurstonleigh Grove.

Isabel wandered a little way by herself, while Mr. Raymond and George and the orphans unpacked the basket. She liked to be alone, that she might think of Lady Gwendoline and her cousin. Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey—oh, how grand it sounded! Why, to have such a name as that would alone be bliss; but to be called Gwendoline Pomphrey, and to wear a white-chip bonnet with that heavenly sprig of heather just trembling on the brim, and those broad, care-

lessly-tied, unapproachable strings! And then, like the sudden fall of a curtain in a brilliant theatre, the scene darkened, and Isabel thought of her own life—the life to which she must go back when it was dark that night: the common parlour, or the best parlour,—what was the distinction, in their dismal wretchedness, that one should be called better than the other?—the bread-and-cheese, the radishes,—and, oh, how George could eat radishes, crunch, crunch, crunch!—till madness would have been relief. This unhappy girl felt a blank despair as she thought of her commonplace home,—her home for ever and ever,—unbrightened by a hope, unsanctified by a memory; her home, in which she had a comfortable shelter, and enough to eat and to drink, and decent garments with which to cover herself; and where, had she been a good or a sensible young woman, she ought of course to have been happy.

But she was not happy. The slow fever that had been burning so long in her veins was now a rapid and consuming fire. She wanted a bright life, a happy life, a beautiful life; she wanted to

be like Lady Gwendoline, and to live in a house like Warncliffe Castle. It was not that she envied Lord Ruysdale's daughter, remember; envy had no part in her nature. She admired Gwendoline Pomphrey too much to envy her. She would like to have been that elegant creature's younger sister, and to have worshipped her and imitated her in a spirit of reverence. She had none of the radical's desire to tear the trappings from the bloated aristocrat; she only wanted to be an aristocrat too, and to wear the same trappings, and to march through life to the same music.

George came, very much out of breath, to fetch her back to the arbour presently, where there was a lobster-salad, and that fine high-coloured Graybridge sherry, and some pale German wine, which Mr. Raymond contributed to the feast.

The orphans and the two gentlemen enjoyed themselves very much. Mr. Raymond could talk about medicine as well as political economy; and he and George entered into a conversation in which there were a great many hard words. The orphans ate—to do that was to be happy; and Isa-

bel sat in a corner of the arbour, looking dreamily out at the shadows on the grass, and wondering why Fate had denied her the privilege of being an earl's daughter.

The drowsy atmosphere of the hot summer's afternoon, the Rhine wine, and the sound of his companion's voice, had such a pleasant influence upon Mr. Raymond, that he fell asleep presently while George was talking; and the young man, perceiving this, produced a Midlandshire newspaper, which he softly unfolded, and began to read.

"Will you come and gather some flowers, Izzie?" whispered one of the orphans. "There are wild-roses and honeysuckle in the lane outside. Do come!"

Mrs. Gilbert was very willing to leave the arbour. She wandered away with the two children along those lovely paths, which now sloped downwards into a kind of ravine, and then wound upwards to the grove. The orphans had a good deal to say to their late governess. They had a new instructress, and "she isn't a bit like you,

dear Mrs. Gilbert," they said; "and we love you best, though she's very kind, you know, and all that; but she's old, you know, very old,—more than thirty; and she makes us hem cambric frills, and does *go on so* if we don't put away our things; and makes us do such horrid sums; and instead of telling us stories when we're out with her, as you used,—oh, don't you remember telling us Pelham? how I love Pelham and Dombey!—about the little boy that died, and Florence, she tells us botany and jology" (the orphans called it 'jology'), "and tertiary sandstone, and old red formations, and things like that; and oh, dear Izzie, I wish you never had been married."

Isabel smiled at the orphans when they entwined themselves about her, and kissed them. But she was thinking of the Alien's dreams, and whether Lady Gwendoline was the "Duchess, with the glittering hair and cruel azure eyes," regarding whom the Alien was cynical, not to say abusive. Mrs. Gilbert felt as if she had never read the Alien half enough. She had seen him, and spoken to him,—a real poet, a real, living,

breathing poet, who only wanted to lame himself, and turn his collars down, to become a Byron.

She was walking slowly along the woodland pathway, with the orphans round about her, like a modern Laocoon family without the serpents, when she was startled by a rustling of the branches a few paces farther on, and looking up, with a sudden half-frightened glance, she saw the tall figure of a man between her and the sunlight.

The man was Mr. Roland Lansdell, the author of *An Alien's Dreams.*

"I'm afraid I startled you, Mrs. Gilbert," he said, taking off his hat and standing bareheaded, with the shadows of the leaves flickering and trembling about him like living things. "I thought I should find Mr. Raymond here, as he said you were going to picnic, and I want so much to talk to the dear old boy. So, as they know me at the lodge, I got them to let me in."

Isabel tried to say something; but the orphans, who were in no way abashed by the stranger's presence, informed Mr. Lansdell that their Uncle Charles was asleep in the arbour where they had

dined,—"up there." The elder orphan pointed vaguely towards the horizon as she spoke.

"Thank you; but I don't think I shall find him very easily. I don't know half the windings and twistings of this place."

The younger orphan informed Mr. Lansdell that the way to the arbour was quite straight,—he couldn't miss it.

"But you don't know how stupid I am," the gentleman answered, laughing. "Ask your uncle if I'm not awfully deficient in the organ of locality. Would you mind—but you were going the other way, and it seems so selfish to ask you to turn back; yet if you would take compassion upon my stupidity, and show me the way—?"

He appealed to the orphans, but he looked at Isabel. He looked at her with those uncertain eyes,—blue with a dash of hazel, hazel with a tinge of blue,—eyes that were always half-hidden under the thick fringe of their lashes, like a glimpse of water glimmering among a forest of rushes.

"Oh, yes, if you like," the orphans cried

simultaneously; "we don't mind going back a bit."

They turned as they spoke, and Isabel turned with them. Mr. Lansdell put on his hat, and walked amongst the long grass beside the narrow pathway.

The orphans were very lively, and fraternised immediately with Mr. Lansdell. "They were Mr. Raymond's nieces? then they were his poor cousin Rosa Harlow's children, of whom he had heard so much from that dear good Raymond? If so, they were almost cousins of his," Mr. Lansdell went on to say, "and they must come and see him at Mordred. And they must ask Mrs. Gilbert to come with them, as they seemed so fond of her." One of the orphans was doing the Laocoon business at that moment.

The girls had plenty to say for themselves. Yes; they would like very much to come to Mordred Priory; it was very pretty; their Uncle Charles had shown them the house one day when he took them out for a drive. It would be capital fun to come, and have a picnic in the grounds, as

Mr. Lansdell proposed. The orphans were ready for any thing in the way of holiday-making. And for Isabel, she only blushed, and said, "Thank you," when Roland Lansdell talked of her visiting Mordred with her late charges. She could not talk to this grand and beautiful creature, who possessed in his own person all the attributes of her favourite heroes.

How often this young dreamer of dreams had fancied herself in such companionship as this; discoursing with an incessant flow of brilliant persiflage, half-scornful, half-playful; holding her own against a love-stricken marquis; making as light of a duke as Mary Queen of Scots ever made of a presumptuous Chastelar! And now that the dream was realised; now that this splendid Byronic creature was by her side, talking to her, trying to make her answer him, looking at her athwart those wondrous eyelashes,—she was stricken and dumbfounded; a miserable, stammering school-girl; a Pamela, amazed and bewildered by the first complimentary address of her aristocratic persecutor.

She had a painful sense of her own deficiency; she knew all at once that she had no power to play the part she had so often fancied herself performing to the admiration of supernumerary beholders. But with all this pain and mortification there mingled a vague delicious happiness. The dream had come true at last. *This* was romance—*this* was life. She knew now what a pallid and ghastly broker's copy of a picture that last year's business had been; the standing on the bridge to be worshipped by a country surgeon; the long tedious courtship; the dowdy, vulgar, commonplace wedding,—she knew now how poor and miserable a mockery all that had been. She looked with furtive glances at the tall figure bending now and then under the branches of the trees; the tall figure in loose garments, which, in the careless perfection of their fashion, were so unlike any thing she had ever seen before; the wonderful face, in which there was the mellow light and colour of a Guido. She stole a few timid glances at Mr. Lansdell, and made a picture of him in her mind, which, like or unlike, must be henceforth

the only image by which she would recognise or think of him. Did she think of him as what he was,—a young English gentleman, idle, rich, accomplished, and with no better light to guide his erratic wanderings than an uncertain glimmer which he called honour? Had she thought of him thus, she would have been surely wiser than to give him so large a place in her mind, or any place at all. But she never thought of him in this way. He was the incarnation of all the dreams of her life; he was Byron alive again, and come home from Missolonghi. He was Napoleon the First, restored to the faithful soldiers who had never believed that fiction of perfidious England, the asserted death of the immortal hero. He was all this; he was a shadowy and divine creature, amenable to no earthly laws. He was here now, in this brief hour, under the flickering sunlight and trembling shadows, and to-morrow he would melt away for ever and ever into the regions of light, which were his everyday habitation.

What did it matter, then, if she was fluttered and dazed and intoxicated by his presence? What

did it signify if the solid earth became empyrean air under this foolish girl's footsteps? Mrs. Gilbert did not even ask herself these questions. No consciousness of wrong or danger had any place in her mind. She knew nothing, she thought nothing; except that a modern Lord Byron was walking by her side, and that it was a very little way to the arbour.

END OF VOL. I.

LONDON:
ROBSON AND SON, GREAT NORTHERN PRINTING WORKS,
PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.